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OR, The Hummer from Hummingbird.

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KING," "PRINCE PRIMROSE, THE FLOWER
OF THE FLOCK," "HUCKLEBERRY,
THE FOOT-HILLS DETECTIVE,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"THE CUCKOO'S NEST."

"One flew East, and one flew West,
And one flew over the cuckoo's nest!"

"It's a beautiful hymn, gentlemen, and a beautiful sentiment; but I must remind you that it refers exclusively to geese! Never let that gilt-edged fact escape you. Geese! Print it in diamond dye on the lining of your cerebrum so that the soap-suds of time can never efface it! For, if they hadn't been geese, they would never have flown over 'The Cuckoo's Nest.' They would have nestled within it, and tarried until the proprietor ejected them in the small hours of the morning!"

"WITH THE COMPLIMENTS OF THE HUMMER FROM HUMMINGBIRD," EXCLAIMED HE,
AS THE WEAPON LEFT HIS HAND.

The speaker, fantastic in attire and adornment, as well as in his speech, stayed for a moment his exuberant eloquence and waved a hand toward the highly-colored sign that swung above the building near him, and in whose shade he had taken refuge. It was not an imposing structure, barn-like in appearance, and with a multiplicity of rooms; and the sign announced to a thirsty and wayfaring public—and to the sporting world, as well—that the place was "The Cuckoo's Nest."

He withdrew the hand and pointed an index finger, white and shapely, toward his hat. A small man, he was—slightly built, with a face smooth, and blonde hair falling to his shoulders. A snuff-colored, cutaway coat, salt-and-pepper trousers, and gaiter shoes were the most noticeable articles of his dress. But the hat, toward which he so proudly directed attention: It was a high, bell-crowned affair, and a pair of cuckoo's wings, one on each side of the high crown, extended upward like plumes. Surmounting his pale face, radiant with good-humor and enthusiasm, this hat, with its singular ornaments, produced a strange, not to say ludicrous effect.

"These wings, gentlemen—the wings of the witching cuckoo, whose notes surpass in sweetness the notes of the ring-dove—are the badge indicative of my new attachment. You have a lovely city here! Mine eyes have been anointed with the waters of wisdom, and I see as I did not see before. But yesterday, and I fancied Hummingbird the gem of the silver-laden mountains. To me it was the fairest among ten thousand, and the one altogether—scrumptious. But, to-day, Cuckoo carries off the bake-shop."

This happy allusion to the rivalry existing between the sister cities of Hummingbird and Cuckoo, mingled as it was with eulogy and prophecy, greatly tickled the pride of his hearers. And the fact that the speaker himself had left the one for the other seemed a foreshadowing of the glorious time when Hummingbird would be abandoned and its citizens and its wealth be absorbed by its rival.

In speaking of Cuckoo as a "city" the orator also touched a responding chord; yet the appellation seemed almost ironical, as he ran his eyes over the ragged and motley array of houses and up and down the long, bowlder-strewn and sun-baked street. It scarcely deserved the title of "town," being merely a wild mining-camp of straggling and uncouth proportions, and with shanties as out at elbows as were many of their owners.

"And so I have given the gentle Hummingbird the grand shake. Not only do I remove its dust from my shoes, but I hurl it back into its teeth and eyes. Hike Hartsook,"—and he bowed with his hand on his heart to indicate that he was, himself, the gentleman referred to—"is no more the Hummer of Hummingbird, but the Hummer from Hummingbird. They tried to keep me there, gentlemen. The men offered me money, the women smiled on me, and the children lugged at my coat-tails. But chains and bonds, golden fetters, woman's smiles and children's wiles, could not hold me."

At this eloquent outburst the crowd whooped and stamped and yelled itself red in the face and altogether so exhausted itself that the Hummer from Hummingbird had to stop and order Arkansaw Tom, the proprietor of The Cuckoo's Nest, to refresh it with liberal potations from the bar. Having swallowed the fiery liquor it again dutifully gathered about the bewinged orator.

"You do me proud, fellow-citizens, when you show such interest in my poor words. A Pittor or a Patrick Henry might feel flattered to receive such marked attention. But though I am no speaker I feel that, like them, I have a message. It is this: The people of Hummingbird fear you. They fear your glorious prosperity. They fear the richness of the mines that seam your mountains. They fear the ozone of your atmosphere, the verdure of your hillsides, the flashing silver of your streamlets, and the cerulean blue of your Italian skies. They fear the rustle and 'get there' of your men. They fear the indescribable charm and graces of your women. They fear—they fear—oh! for a dictionary, that I might tear out by the handful words expressive of my meaning!—they fear—you!"

A yell of wild, fierce joy went up from the excited and gratified crowd. Plainly, this Hummer from Hummingbird, if the demands of ambition or selfish interest should dictate, might prove a dangerous leader. He seemed to know just what to say and how to say it to arouse them to the utmost. They laughed and screamed, whooped and danced as he willed. He played upon their rugged sensibilities and their heart-strings as a master sweeps the strings of his harp. His words had been hollow and high sounding, and had expressed little; yet they were the words for the time and the occasion.

With a graceful spring he leaped from the box, and elbowed his way toward the entrance of the Cuckoo's Nest.

Now that he was upon the ground his slight stature was more noticeable in comparison with the towering bulk of the men who pressed

around him. But there was a look of intelligence on his high, fair forehead, and in his bright blue eyes, that set him as on a pinnacle above.

"Set 'em up again, barkeep!" and he removed his hat as he passed the portal, and shook back his wealth of blonde hair. "Our friends here are as thirsty as Arizonian sands. Only that they prefer red liquor to water. The best you've got ain't any too good for the occasion. I shall hereafter call this my birthday, for I feel as if I had taken a new lease of life. And, my gentle manipulator of cocktails, don't let the observation escape you: I am the Hummer from Hummingbird!"

Arkansaw Tom was nothing loth to obey. One might even fancy that he quickened his steps as a twenty-dollar gold-piece left Hartsook's pocket and jingled merrily on the bar.

It was not every day that he had a customer who treated so royally.

Before Hartsook he placed the best the house afforded; then thrusting his hands deep into his pockets he surveyed the pressing crowd, and asked the man nearest to "nominate his p'izen."

The Hummer half filled a small glass from the bottle before him: and then sipped it slowly as he watched the others "b'ist" their poison, for truly the stuff served by the proprietor of the Cuckoo's Nest was nothing less.

"And now, gentlemen," Arkansaw observed, when the cravings of the mob had been temporarily satisfied, "in the name o' the good people o' Cuckoo, I drink to the health of our friend! He is, feller-citizens, a Jim Dandy; a gen'lman an' a judge o' good whisky; a lover o' sleek hosses and purty women; a man what never goes back on his frien's; an'"—here Arkansaw raised his glass slowly and impressively—"the Hummer from Hummingbird!"

CHAPTER II.

AN ASTONISHED ROPER.

NOT all the people in Cuckoo had been gathered in the crowd in front of Arkansaw Tom's drinking establishment. In fact, so far as this story is concerned, many of the most important personages were absent.

Prominent among these were Judge Lemuel Pendergast, and Judge Lemuel Pendergast's hostler, Lariat Bill.

The latter was an ex-cowboy, much given to drink, and glorying in his skill with the rope.

It chanced that when the Cuckoo's Nest emptied itself of the boisterous drinkers, and the Hummer from Hummingbird took his way airily down the street, he was sighted by Lariat Bill. The latter was pretty deeply in his cups that day; and, as was his custom when richened and elated by intoxicants, was mounted on his favorite broncho and careening about the town, swinging his lasso with a grace and skill born of long practice. He had roped the favorite pig of an indignant citizen, narrowly missed the curving tail-feathers of a strutting rooster, and was looking for new worlds to conquer, when his gaze fell on the Hummer.

"Whoop!" he screeched, his face expanding with delight. "Hyer's my mutton!"

The pale face and slight form, the air of neatness, the floating blonde hair, and above all the upward-sweeping wings adorning the bell-crowned hat appealed irresistibly to his sense of the ludicrous.

Hike Hartsook was absorbed in thought, and failed to notice Lariat Bill when the latter gave that warning cry and set his horse in motion; all of which is little to be wondered at, for he had heard little else than whooping and yelling ever since setting his foot on the sacred soil of Cuckoo.

Arkansaw Tom, and three or four others familiar with the eccentricities of Lariat Bill, uttered calls of alarm, which, however, passed unheeded. Not until he heard the whistling noose did Hartsook realize his true position.

To be caught thus, and dragged at the heels of a galloping horse, a spectacle to make the groundlings roar, would have been ruinous. All the consideration he had gained by his speech and expensive treating would have been lost. A hero can not be made ridiculous and retain the worship and admiration of his adherents.

None understood this better than Hummer. And, besides, to be roped and drawn through the dust and over the abounding bowlders was a thing not to be relished. Quick as a flash, therefore, his right hand flew upward, there was a gleam of steel, and the rope parted with a snap. The next instant the sunlight glittered on a hurtling revolver, grasped and thrown with a quick, true aim.

"With the compliments of the Hummer from Hummingbird!" exclaimed he, as the weapon left his hand.

It was a heavy, silver-mounted affair, and, striking Lariat Bill squarely between the eyes, it tumbled him from the saddle.

This sudden collapse of its rider so frightened the half-wild broncho that it dashed madly away, the severed rope trailing behind it like the streaming tail of a comet.

This quick turning of the tables was a thing so unexpected, and was altogether so cleverly

and neatly done, that the excited loungers in front of the Cuckoo's Nest bellowed with delight.

In the midst of their uproarious applause, and bowing as smiling and blandly as if nothing had occurred to disturb the even serenity of his mind, the Hummer from Hummingbird retraced his way to the shelter of the saloon.

"Twere a beautiful knock-down. I don't think I ever see a beautifuller!" and Arkansaw Tom's wide mouth distended in a series of chuckles. "You'll haf' to look out fer Lariat, though. He's a hull team and a yaller dog under the wagon, when he gits his mad up. I'll 'low he'll come a-b'ilin' fer ye as soon as he kin gather hisself together an' fin' out which direction the lightnin' come frum."

The warning was given with the best of intentions. No man knew better than the tall, lank proprietor how really dangerous a man was Lariat Bill when drinking and angered.

"I'm kinder sorry, too!" and Arkansaw rubbed his nose reflectively. "Hanged if I ain't! I wanted you two fellers to be frien's! 'Ceptin' of Judge Pendergast, I cal'late I hain't got a pard what I think more of than I do o' this same Lariat!"

A number of the Hummer's new admirers had followed him into the saloon, and were now clustered near the bar, vaguely wondering what their hero would do when the time came for action. Some, however, observing the paleness of the Hummer's face, and the smallness of his stature, were fearful lest he should not prove equal to the emergency.

"So, he is a special friend of yours, eh?" putting the question to Arkansaw, and at the same time slipping into a seat behind the card-table near the bar. "These little difficulties are enough to make one weep. Like the rain and the sunshine they come, and there is no way to hinder. To thus lose a friend and gain an enemy distresses me, dreadfully."

He drew from his pocket a dainty handkerchief, gingerly shook out its silken folds, and mopped his forehead.

"If I had know the fellow was coming, I should have taken a side street—or clumb a tree."

Arkansaw Tom and his satellites scarcely knew whether to take this singular individual seriously or not; and there was as much relief as expectancy in the sigh which greeted the announcement:

"Hyer he comes!"

Not all of the new friends of the Hummer had followed him into the building. Fully half of them had remained to see what the hostler would do.

As for Lariat Bill, himself, never was a man more astounded. He had not anticipated even the slightest show of resistance. When felled from the horse, however, it took some time for him to comprehend what had happened, for the little sense not driven out by the whisky fumes fled before the crushing blow of the revolver. For fully five minutes he lay there in the street, staring dazedly up at the sky.

"Well, may I be durned!"

With this expressive exclamation he came back from cloud-land, carefully felt of himself to see that he was all there, sat up and blinked blindly down the street.

"Feel as if I'd been kicked by an ellyphant an' then tromped on. Bronco an' rope both gone. Cuss that yaller-headed galoot, anyhow! Wonder where he's tuck hisself to?"

The crowd in front of the Cuckoo's Nest gave ample answer; and the sight of them, grinning and gesticulating and showing much merriment, made him furious.

He looked about for the revolver which had downed him; but not seeing it drew one of his own and strode botly toward the saloon; and it was at this juncture that the warning cry went up of, "Hyer he comes!"

The Hummer from Hummingbird smiled more sweetly than ever, if possible, when he heard the announcement.

"Better git out yer gun!" Arkansaw advised.

The advice was scarcely given, however, when the form of Lariat Bill darkened the door. His pistol was cocked and ready, and his blazing eyes swept the room before him.

As they fell on the quiet form of Hartsook the fire went out of them somewhat and a sickly pallor overspread the ruddy face. And there was ample cause for this change.

Not a feature of the Hummer's face had altered, not a muscle had moved; yet, when he saw the hot-headed hostler appeared in the doorway, he had softly drawn and cocked a weapon. And now, the would-be roper found himself looking full into the steely tube of the identical revolver that had so crashed against his forehead.

"Put down that young cannon, my good friend, or you will compel me to perforate you! I should hate to, most awfully, don't you know. 'Twould be such a waste of lead!"

The very calmness of the tones, as well as the words, were calculated to sting to the quick a man like Lariat Bill. He half uplifted his own pistol, but dropped it again as he caught the deadly glitter in Hartsook's eyes.

Lariat Bill was no fool, and the events of the last few minutes had completely sobered him.

He saw that to carry out his original intentions would be to commit suicide.

"You've got the drop on me, cuss ye," he grated. "But if you'll put down that gun an' gimme jes' half a show I'll mop the floor with yer p'izen little carkiss!"

"Very generous of you. But as I happen to be in good-humor to-day I am willing to do about anything you ask. I'm just like a purring pussy-cat. Rub me the right way and I'll sing like a saw-mill.

"Now, if you'll just mention how I can accommodate you? Pistols at ten paces; naked fists; knives; a ring and gloves, with go-as-you please or Marquis of Queensberry rules? As the boys say, 'nominate your p'izen.'

A shout of approval went up at this. "Let's hev the gloves," sung out a voice. "I'll bet an ounce o' dust on Lariat."

The hostler grasped at the suggestion. In height he overtopped Hartsook by at least a foot, and his bulk seemed twice as great.

"Yes; gimme 'em! If I git a good whack at him I'll make his head bob so that his yeller hair'll choke him to death."

As for the Hummer from Hummingbird, he seemed wholly unconcerned, and made no response when Arkansaw Tom looked questioning-ly at him.

Taking this silence for consent, Arkansaw left his place behind the bar and advanced with a pair of boxing gloves.

Hartsook arose, at this; but though he thrust his revolver back into its case, he watched his antagonist keenly, evidently fearing treachery.

As if by magic the excited crowd formed itself into a ring about the two. When the Hummer threw off his coat preparatory to taking the gloves there went up a buzz of admiration, for the apparently slightly-built man was seen to be really well-developed and of fine physique.

Even Lariat Bill could not help noting this, though he scorned the idea that Hartsook would prove a dangerous foe.

The hostler had no sooner donned the gloves than he made a furious rush at the Hummer. But the latter deftly evaded it, and retreated, smiling in a most maddening way.

Again Lariat Bill made a rush. Instead of retreating, however, as Lariat Bill expected, Hartsook parried the blow and dealt another. But for the gloves it would have done serious work; for it took the hostler fairly under the angle of the jaw, lifted him from his feet, and sprawled him flat on his back in the center of the floor.

But Lariat Bill was up again with marvelous agility. He had learned a lesson, though, and been taught to respect the skill of his adversary. Instead of striking like a kicking broncho, he attempted to close with Hartsook and crush him in a bear-like hug, thinking that if he once got the little man's head in chancery, an easy victory would be his.

The plan was easier to form than to execute. The Hummer from Hummingbird seemed to possess the elusive qualities of an eel. Time and again Lariat Bill bore down upon him, thinking that now he had him in his grasp; but each time the clutching hands pawed only the empty air. It was very exasperating work, very hot work, and was rapidly exhausting the big man's strength.

To judge from what soon followed, Lariat was pursuing just the tactics desired by his opponent, for when he had almost worn himself out with his futile rushes, and his brawny chest was rising and falling like a miniature bellows, Hartsook came close up to him and delivered a series of blows with lightning-like rapidity and telling effect.

The pugnacious hostler did not rise this time. All the fire and fight had been knocked out of him.

"Take off yer gloves," he said, finally, drawing himself to a sitting posture. "Lariat Bill Jackson may be a daggasted fool, which I've no doubt he is, but he ain't no hawg! No, siree! He knows when he's got enough."

Then, with great deliberation and with a face as serious as that of a fashionable undertaker, he got upon his feet, passed his gloves to Arkansaw Tom, and advanced with outstretched hand toward Hartsook.

"Shake, my banty game-chicken! You're a good 'un if you air little; and if I ever say another word about yer yaller hair, I hope some feller'll kick me fer an eejut."

The hand was grasped warmly, and the men who but a moment before had been foes were now friends.

CHAPTER III.

THE HUMMINGBIRD STAGE.

Two days before the occurrence of the events narrated in the preceding chapters, two men were lying in a clump of quaking asps near the wagon-trail running between the camps of Hummingbird and Cuckoo. It was a wild and deserted spot, almost midway between the towns. Not a sign of bird, beast or human being was to be seen, for the two men were so screened by their leafy covert as to be wholly invisible.

They were a villainous pair. Their hair and beard were scraggy and untended, their cloth-

ing rough and dirt-stained, and their faces marked by years of crime and dissipation.

They were evidently troubled and ill at ease, for, ever and anon, they furtively advanced to the edge of the trees and scanned the trail with anxious and straining eyes.

"'Bout time fer the ole hearse!" drawled one of them, known to his intimates as Blinky Jim. "W'ot ef th' feller hain't in it when it do come?"

"Cain't git 'im, then, I reckon," was the other's sage reply, as he shaded his eyes with his hand and took another survey. "Cain't git w'ot ain't within reach, ez th' ole blue hen said to th' hongry fox, w'en she wuz roostin' too high fer 'im."

And having dropped this solid chunk of wisdom he shuffled back to the fallen log against which he had been reclining, only to be aroused into activity, a moment later, by the announcement from his "pardner" that the "hearse" was in sight.

The coming vehicle was but a black speck showing in a cloud of dust on a faraway loop of the trail; but it was sufficient to galvanize their lanky frames and fill them with the fire of youth.

"Ef we jes' had a spy-glass, er a binoc'lar!" and Blinky's pal, Jed Jenkins, drew in his breath with a whistling gasp.

The best of glasses would scarcely have served their purpose, however, for the stage passed around a bend, and out of sight, even as he looked.

It quickly reappeared, though; and came on so rapidly that it grew from the size of a bee to that of a hornet, and then developed into the proportions of a Concord stage-coach drawn by six horses.

"There's somebody in it!" Blinky exclaimed, fingering his rifle nervously. "Ten to one, it's our man. Wisht I know'd it shore, and't we had our claws onto him. It's that p'izon Alkali Abe, handlin' uv the ribbons, too. Better lay 'im out, ef he shows fight, hedn't we?"

"You're a-hittin' it, pard! These ole fingers jes' a-eechin' to do that same, anyhow."

With a lurch and a bound, and a whistling of the driver's lash, the stage swung around the rocky point in front of the hiding-place of the precious pair, driver and passenger all unaware of their dangerous proximity.

Then Blinky Jim, with leveled rifle, stepped from his place of concealment, followed closely by Jenkins in similar warlike attitude.

"Up with yer han's, er down goes yer meat-house!" and Blinky, as he uttered the words, ran his eyes along the barrel of his rifle and drew a bead on the driver.

Abe, surprised as he must have been, seemed not wholly unprepared. He gave the horses a vigorous cut, and swung over the side of the box opposite, to present as small a target surface as possible. At the same time, the passenger whipped out two big navies and opened a rattling fire on their assailants.

"You will hev it!" shrieked Blinky, enraged at this; and his rifle belched its deadly contents.

The aim was unerring, and without a moan Alkali Abe relinquished his hold on life. He would have fallen headlong from the box had not his foot caught and upheld him.

Jed Jenkins fired at the stage's defender, but his aim was not as true as had been Blinky's. The ball shattered the glass of the hoisted window and plowed perilously near the man's face, but did no further damage.

As the reins fell from the hands of the dead Abe, the horses, frightened by the fusillade, and feeling no check upon their movements, dashed madly away.

A hundred paces beyond, the trail ran along the face of a canyon wall, making a sharp bend to the right. The roadway was very narrow here, there being barely space for the vehicle to pass. Below was a sheer descent of fifty feet to where there was another shelf; and at the side of and beyond this shelf ran a mountain brook. The waters of the brook collected at this point into a large, glassy pool, which was fringed about with a low growth of willows and scrubby bushes.

The rattle of the hoofs of the runaway horses and the bounding of the stage wheels against the rocks made mad music. Faster and faster flew the scared horses, wilder leaped the stage. The passenger, aware of the peril that lay before him and heedless of the rifles of his would-be assassins, swung open the stage door and attempted to spring out. But as he did so, the horses made the sharp turn to the right, a wheel struck against a rocky projection, and the vehicle was hurled bodily into the air.

The rear horses were thrown down by the violence of the shock, the harness gave way under the terrific strain, and the coach with its human freight fell over the precipice. The horses, relieved of their burden, scrambled to their feet and raced onward toward Cuckoo.

With a crash the stage struck on the rocky shelf below, the dead driver being half-buried beneath the splintered wreck. But the passenger, who had been clinging to the step when the first shock came, and who was then tossed into space, fell head-first into the pool.

The villains on the slope above had watched

with astonishment and bewilderment the unexpected result of their attack. Now, they came hurrying down the trail, scarce knowing what to expect and eager with excitement.

"We hev 'im, now!" cried Blinky. "We hev 'im, ef he hain't dead; an' ef he's dead, we hev 'im, anyhow!"

To the driver they seemed to give no thought. In their eyes he was so much carrion, fit only to fill the maws of hungry coyotes.

But the luckless passenger had no sort of notion of allowing himself to fall into their murderous hands. The fall had been a terrible one, and but for the water he would have met instant death. As it was he was strangled and somewhat dazed, but wholly uninjured. He had had but a fleeting glimpse of the pool and its willow-fringed shores, but that glimpse had given him an idea and inspired him with hope. He had no weapon now, save the knife in his belt, for his revolvers had been torn from his grasp by the shock which the stage received, and he was in no condition, therefore, to do battle with his well-armed foes.

Fortunately he was a good swimmer, and without rising to the surface, he struck out boldly for the opposite bank of the stream. When his hands touched the rock he floated cautiously upward until the air swept his face. Then he drew in an inspiring draught, and opening his eyes saw the sheltering arms of the willows.

"Thank God!" he murmured, almost overpowered by his deep sense of relief and gratitude. "Perhaps I can evade those scoundrels yet."

CHAPTER IV.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

JED JENKINS and Blinky Jim, on the narrow ledge above, craned their necks and watched and waited for the man to rise; but they waited in vain.

"Hanged ef it don't look like the feller wuz drowned! Mus' 'a' gone to the bottom like any blame' stone."

"Yas, I 'low as much!" and Blinky coolly bit a chunk out of a big plug of tobacco. "Couldn't swim no more'n a cook-stove."

Nevertheless, they were not satisfied with mere supposition, but sought a place where they might descend to the water's edge.

After descending they passed near the overturned and splintered stage; but the only heed they gave to the mangled body of the poor driver was to make sure that life was extinct. Then they went on to the pool.

"You keep an eye out at the chute below," Jed suggested. "Ef the feller's really drowned, the body may pass through there. 'Twill, certain, ef the current 't this end ketches it."

It was a lucky thing for the hunted man that they had no means of crossing the river except by swimming, and both were averse to that, for they searched the willowy shore on that side with a thoroughness that nothing could escape. And when they had satisfied themselves that the missing man could by no possibility be on that side, they drew their revolvers, and fired shot after shot into every willowy clump along the opposite shore.

This was a most trying ordeal to the hidden passenger. There was nothing but the leaves and twigs to screen him from this searching fire, and they formed but poor shelter. Once or twice the balls from the pistols cut dangerously near; but not one touched him.

"Tain't no use!" declared Jenkins. "We're jes' a-wastin' good ca'tridges. The feller's ez dead ez a dornic, an' ef he didn't go out 't the chute, he's at the bottom o' this hyer pon'. 'Tany rate, they hain't no use in pokin' roun' hyer. Them hosses'll reach Cuckoo in about 'n hour, the way they wuz a-goin'; an' then we're li'ble to hev a wheen o' fellers onto our backs 'fore we knows it."

"I tell ye w'ot," said Blinky. "I've been a-doin' some figgerin'; an' I cal'late we'd better keep mum 'bout us bevin' any finger in this hyer pie. We'll jes' go on to town an' report ez how we happened to be a-comin' along the trail, an' were jes' a-castin' our optics aroun' lookin' at the willers an' sich w'en we see the blame ole hearse a-layin' hyer all bu'sted into kindlin' wood, an' Alkali Ike dead ez a door-nail underneath it. 'N we'll say 't how it mus' 'a' been the work o' road-agents; an' thet them same road-agents mus' 'a' been a lot o' confounded fools fer to go an' hold up a stage w'ot hedn't nary a pilgrim in it."

"K'rect!" assented Jenkins; and having thus chimed in with the opinions of his companion he turned his back on the pool and moved past the stage and toward the shelf above.

The concealed man drew a breath of relief as he saw them climb to the trail and disappear along it in the direction of Cuckoo. He had been forced to remain in an uncomfortable and cramped position. In order to keep himself well concealed and his body beneath the water he had been compelled to hold to the willow trunks with his hands, and to work his feet down among the matted roots.

He had noticed, too, what had escaped the keen eyes of the searchers: A slightly muddy tinge had been taken on by the water, showing

that a greater volume was beginning to make its way down the channel and that a rise in the creek was imminent.

This was portentous of ill. It told that the intense heat was making rapid inroads on the distant snow-fields that fed the stream, and that in all probability the now quiet channel would be filled all too soon with a raging flood.

When that time should come the willows would no longer screen him.

"Now, I'll get out of this," he asserted, attempting to draw himself up. To his surprise and dismay, he discovered that one of his feet had been caught and was held fast by the matted willow roots into which he had thrust it. Again and again he pulled at the foot, endeavoring to disengage it. Then he tried to slip it out of the heavy boot; but the latter had become so soaked and shrunken by the water that he could not accomplish it.

And the flood took on a darker and dirtier tinge, a perceptible current set across the pool, and he knew the waters were rising and that the threatened flood would soon be upon him.

"Must I drown here like a rat in a trap, after having escaped the rifles of those villains?"

He strained again at the foot, struggling desperately to free himself.

There was a roaring sound, now, in the rocky gorge above. Looking in that direction, he saw the on-coming wall of water, the foam on its crest resembling angry, white teeth.

One minute more and he would be overwhelmed by it.

He remembered his knife and drew it from its case with a low, glad cry. That sharpened blade meant much to him, now. It spoke of liberation, of hope and life.

Burying himself beneath the water he slashed and hacked at the twining roots with the energy of desperation. Some of them gave way beneath his furious strokes, but others still clung tenaciously, and he was compelled to rise to the surface for a breath of air.

The flood was now screaming down the channel like a maddened lion dashing upon its prey. Already the pool felt strongly the influx of the flood. The water was muddier, the current swifter, and the willow twigs about his shoulders, which had before been visible, were now buried from sight.

With a groan that was almost indicative of despair, he noted all this. On how slender a thread his life seemed to hang at that instant! Those fibrous roots were apparently destined to drag him to death as effectually as if they had been iron chains.

But he had no time for speculation. Immediate and incessant action alone could save him.

Again he sunk beneath the water and furiously plied the knife.

Oh, horror! He heard the wild flood's terrible swish and rush above him, and felt the dashing waters tug at his form as if they would tear it bodily away and hurl it to death on the cruel rocks.

Another stroke, and he was free. Letting the knife slip from his fingers, he began to boldly battle with the current. A few powerful strokes brought him to the surface. Even in the lately-placid pool, the waves were now surging like an angry sea against breakers.

He saw that there was but one way of escape. Not far away a tree rose sturdily out of the flood. The willows and all the low-growing bushes were concealed; and beyond this tree the waves raced toward the higher slopes.

If he could reach this tree, he might save himself; otherwise death surely awaited him in the narrow channel below.

Understanding all this, he swam with the strength of desperation. His soaked clothing, and especially the sodden boots, hampered him greatly. But by strenuous exertions he managed to reach the vicinity of the tree, and succeeded in grasping one of the branches.

Working along this branch, which dipped and swayed threateningly under his weight, he drew himself through the water to the tree trunk.

He could do no more for a time, however. His strength was much exhausted; and it required his every effort to keep from being swept away.

When his vigor had somewhat returned, he climbed slowly and painfully upon the limb, and gained a footing among the stronger boughs. Anxiously he looked along the trail as he settled himself into a comfortable attitude.

"If those scoundrels should come back, now, I should be in a bad fix!"

The boughs of the tree were not set closely together, and between the interstices he would have been plainly visible to any one upon the opposite shelf, or even on the trail above. And if they had appeared at that moment, there would have been no way of escape; for around him seethed the flood, which, bold swimmer that he was, he could not have breasted successfully.

But Blinky Jim and his pard were then toiling over the route toward the mining-camp of Cuckoo, satisfied in the belief that the man they had sought was lying dead at the bottom of the pool.

They might have turned back if they had been

aware of the sudden flood; but the trail had led them far from the river, and no sound of the tossing waters reached them.

For two long hours the torrent raged, keeping the man a close prisoner in the tree. Then the creek fell almost as suddenly as it had risen. The cause of this was not far to seek to one accustomed to the ways of mountain streams. The blazing sun of mid-day had precipitated the flood, and the sun being now far past the meridian and well on its way toward the western ranges, the quick chill of coming night had supplanted the blistering heat.

Now that the waters had retired to their old bed, the tree was left high and dry. But there were everywhere evidences of the violence of the deluge. The willows were coated with pasty mud; heaps of sand and debris covered the banks; and here and there great logs stranded upon projecting rocks lifted their black backs like turtles enjoying a sun-bath.

The man, who had been thoroughly chilled by his long drenching in snow-water, was glad to clamber down from his high perch and once more plant his feet firmly on the rocks. There was no way of reaching the trail except by crossing the pool, and as his clothing was already thoroughly wet, he gingerly and hesitatingly entered the stream.

The swim was not a difficult one this time, for the pool, though still muddy, had regained its old placidity.

He looked about for the revolvers which had been hurled from his hands in falling from the stage, and succeeded in finding one. It had landed on the shelf, and so had been above the highest point reached by the water. But the other failed to be revealed to his searching eyes. Very likely it had fallen further down the slope, and been covered by the deposit of sediment.

A feeling of reassurance came to him as his hands grasped the weapon. He would not be quite defenseless should necessity arise for its use.

"Thank Heaven, I am out of that scrape!" with a regretful, backward glance toward the body of the driver.

Then he climbed laboriously to the trail, and disappeared in the thickening gloom.

CHAPTER V. CAPTAIN PLAYFAIR.

JED JENKINS and Blinky Jim did not find the horses on the trail, as they half expected to do, and so continued on toward Cuckoo, believing that news of disaster to the stage would be in the mouths of every one when they should arrive there. But the stage-team had become entangled in the trailing lines, and so was turned aside from the direct route, only to bring up in a patch of greensward, where they industriously fell to feeding. And here they were gobbled by a denizen of the mountains who felt it incumbent on him to lay hands on and carry away every tempting bit of horseflesh that came within his reach.

When Jenkins and his pal reached Cuckoo, and failed to hear anything of the missing horses or of troubles with the stage, they went at once to the drinking establishment of Arkansaw Tom. Here, a sly wink from Blinky caused Arkansaw to direct them to the stairway and give them the number of a room.

In answer to a tap on the door of this room a man appeared. He was neatly and even fastidiously dressed, and the sleekest of silk hats sat on his head. His face was a sickly white in color, and although he was but slightly past the middle age, his hair and mustache were like driven snow. His entire aspect was expressive of the fact that he was prematurely aged by excitement and excesses.

This man was Judge Lemuel Pendergast, recognized as a leader among the citizens of Cuckoo, and altogether highly honored and influential. So wild a mining-camp could not boast much law, but that little was administered in truly border fashion by Pendergast.

"Evenin', jedge!" and Jed Jenkins pulled awkwardly at his ragged hat.

The expression of Pendergast's face on seeing these men showed that he was well, even intimately, acquainted with them.

He looked closely and questioningly at them, as he flung open the door and motioned to them to enter.

"Jes' a little bizness!" and Blinky assumed a deprecatory air, as he dropped into a cushioned seat. "We 'lowed it wouldn't do to keep, an' so we come straight to ye."

Pendergast lifted his brows, but said nothing; whereupon Jed Jenkins plunged into the story they had agreed to tell.

"And you just saw the stage there and the dead driver?"

"Jes' so!"

"And there weren't a pair of road-agents of about your size had any hand in the muss?"

"Hope I may die, ef they wuz, jedge!"

"And there wasn't anybody in the stage when it was attacked, you say?"

"Nary a pilgrim!"

"And you two were not in the vicinity?"

"Now ye'r' a-shoutin'; we wuzn't!"

The judge smiled and rubbed his snowy mustache.

"I'm much afraid you'd be a dead give-away in the witness-box. A first-class lawyer-sharp would tie you up till you couldn't budge. If you were not there, how do you know what happened, and if the stage had any passengers or not?"

Blinky attempted to extricate himself, but only floundered deeper.

"It's all right!" and the judge blandly waved his hand. "I think I understand you. You fancied there was some gold-dust in the coach, and you went for it. In doing so, you killed the driver and played smash generally."

"'Pon honor, jedge!" both exclaimed in a breath.

But the judge would not hear their protests; believing he understood the affair, and that they were simply weaving a web of lies.

"As judge of the camp and dispenser of justice, I think I'd better take some men and go out where the accident happened; we'll call it an accident."

Saying which, he drew his sleek silk hat down on his white hair and led the way from the room, the door of which he locked after them.

"Send some one for Red Selkirk," he said, addressing Arkansaw Tom. "And tell him to bring a half-dozen good men with him."

Red Selkirk was the marshal of the camp, and the judge's right hand-man.

The owner of the Cuckoo's Nest dispatched a messenger as requested, and within five minutes Selkirk arrived, a number of brawny, well-armed miners at his heels.

A few words passed in private between the marshal and the judge; then the hastily collected party, accompanied by Blinky and Jenkins, set out for the scene of the stage wreck.

The afternoon was more than half-gone, and darkness had fallen when the place was reached. To attempt a pursuit of the supposed road-agents, even if any trail or traces of them could have been discovered, would have been the height of absurdity. The judge, doubtless, had no such desire or intention, and had come on that wild-goose chase with other objects in view.

Of course, nothing was discovered except the splintered stage-coach and the body of the murdered driver. The last was placed on a roughly improvised litter, and was borne by the marshal's men toward Cuckoo.

Under pretense of making further search, the judge remained with Blinky Jim and Jenkins. But he did not tarry with them long. After inquiring as to the welfare of a certain prisoner whom they seemed to be holding at his command, he dismissed them and went on up the trail alone.

The darkness was increasing. When he had traversed a mile, he turned aside into a well-wooded ravine. When he emerged from it his whole appearance was altered. There was a complete change of clothing, the white hair was covered by a coal-black wig, and a mask of the same ebony hue entirely hid his face.

In this guise he pushed further into the hills. When near a certain wooded slope he placed his hands to his lips, beneath his mask, and gave a low whistle. It was answered from a point not far distant. At this, Pendergast advanced, replied to the hail of a guard, and passed up a defile into a rocky inclosure where were gathered a number of men.

The place was so hemmed in by precipitous cliffs, and so difficult of access that a securer camp could scarcely have been found.

The men about the fire arose respectfully, and one of them came forward, addressing the newcomer as Captain Playfair.

"Just a word or two with you, Bozeman; I haven't long to stay."

The tones were as completely disguised as was the speaker's face.

Bozeman Jack, for by this title the leader of the road-agents was known, stepped into the shadows beyond the fire with the man-whom he had called Captain Playfair.

That the disguised man was really his captain and superior was quickly shown by their words and manner.

"Any news?"

And in reply to Bozeman's question, Playfair told of the wreck of the stage, but told it in a way that could not lead his lieutenant to think he had any intimate knowledge of the facts.

"It's too bad!" and Playfair crossed his legs easily. "I've been expecting a lot of dust to come over that trail within the next week. It's to be sent from the bank at Hummingbird to the bank at Cuckoo. The plan is to ship it over this trail next Thursday. The plan may be changed, now."

"I hope not, though. Keep a man at the lone pine in the far valley, and I'll get word to you of any changes. We must have that dust."

"You bet!" was the road-agent's laconic rejoinder.

There was some further talk, but enough has been repeated to show its drift; and twenty minutes later, Captain Playfair was piloted down the gorge and went his way.

CHAPTER VI.

A PLOTTING QUARTETTE.

THE night following Lariat Bill's attack on the Hummer from Hummingbird, Judge Lemuel

Pendergast was seated comfortably in his private room above the Cuckoo's Nest. With him were three men, members of the sporting fraternity. They were Silk-Hat Sid, Cockney Joe and Sam Turnbull. The first named was dudish and dapper, wearing gold eye-glasses, and very proud of his silken mustache and soft, white hands. Cockney Joe was a typical Briton, beef-necked and burly, and with an accent that would betray his nationality, even if his looks did not. As for Turnbull, he was a border gambler, with a rakish recklessness stamped indelibly on his handsome features.

The judge was not in a particularly good humor. They had been playing, the bets had been heavy, and his luck was of the worst.

"I guess I've got enough for to-night," and Pendergast pushed back the cards which Cockney Joe was beginning to deal. "My luck's gone back on me."

"Just hanother 'and, judge!" the Briton pleaded. "You don't give ha feller 'alf a show. You pulled ha 'undred hout o' my pocket honly last night."

"And lost three hundred to-night! Seems to me that evens the score, with a vengeance."

"Make the stakes smaller, then!" and Silk-Hat Sid ran his white fingers nervously over his mustache. "I'm not caring anything about the gains; it's the excitement of the play I'm after."

"I've had enough, I tell you!" and there was an unwonted fierceness in the judge's tones. "Go down and tackle some of the miners!"

"But, stay!"

He pushed back his chair, and looked thoughtfully at them.

"What do you think of the Hummer from Hummingbird?"

"He's worthy of the name," Turnbull laughingly averred.

"Hupon my honor!" and Cockney's big mouth emitted a roar of delight. "The way 'e laid bout that 'ostler was beautiful. Hi don't think Hi've seen hanything 'alf as 'andsome since Hi left Lunnan. Hif Hi 'ad 'ad tears to weep—"

"You would have turned Cuckoo into a briny lake!" Silk-Hat Sid supplemented.

"That fellow will be a thorn in our side, if I ain't much mistaken," said Pendergast. "I just wanted to see what you thought of him."

"And now you've seen!"

"I've seen; and I presume your opinions represent pretty well the opinions of the camp. I'm sorry it's so. He's no friend of ours, depend upon it. In my judgment, he is as dangerous an enemy as we ever had."

A troubled, anxious look sat on the face of each of his listeners.

"Ow is that? 'E seemed has much hof a gentleman has hif 'e'd been the prince happarent 'imself."

"You can never judge of an ear of corn by the kind of husk it wears. Some of the worst devils I ever saw appeared to be perfect angels."

"Present company always excepted, I presume?" Sid sarcastically questioned.

"Always!" the judge declared. "I should never think of questioning the integrity and purity of *your* motives. But, joking aside, this Hummer from Hummingbird, as he styles himself, is destined to make us trouble."

"I suppose you've noticed that Old Adamant has also put in an appearance; and, though it may be a mere co-incidence, it looks suspicious to me that the two should show up at about the same time."

"Hi 'adn't 'eard hof that!" and Cockney Joe's face lost something of its floridity. "'E is a devil, sure enough!"

"He's been lying pretty close, though I fancy he won't do that long. I saw him only once, but I couldn't be mistaken in the man; and, besides, some of the boys got a good look at him, and they say there can be no mistake about its being Old Adamant."

"I hoped we were rid of him for good!" said Turnbull.

"So we all hoped. But it seems we are not."

"And this Hartsook?" Turnbull queried.

"He's taken the place by storm; and I'm sorry to say I inadvertently helped him. It flashed through my mind, as soon as I clapped eyes on him, that he was not here for our good, and so I sent Lariat Bill to do him up. But he turned the tables on me by laying out Lariat Bill, and thus lifted himself a good many notches in the estimation of the public."

"Why, he even pulled the wool over the eyes of so long-headed a chap as Arkansaw Tom! Tom was fairly singing his praises!" and Pendergast's tones expressed the deepest disgust.

"But I put a good-sized flea in the old man's ear, and ever since he has been chanting quite a different tune."

"Hand Hi've been just ha 'ooping things hup for the little man!" was Cockney Joe's humble confession. "Blast my heyas, but it do make ha man feel like swearing hat 'is grandmother."

"And there have been others doing the same, I guess!" looking keenly at Turnbull. "Well, we must have no more of it. The scamp's popular enough now. To increase his popularity would be about the same as putting slip-nooses

about our own necks. We can't afford to do that."

"We'll remember the hint, me gentle preceptor," Silk-Hat Sid smilingly averred.

"And there is another thing I want to speak about: It's been nearly a year, now, since I was elected judge of this camp, and my term of office will, therefore, expire in the not distant future. I have made a good judge, I believe?"

"For our side, yes!" and there was a general chorus of assent.

"I've held the office for the benefit of *our* side. My deeds have proved that, I think. And for the same reason, I must hold it again, if I can."

"And the other boys, likewise!" Silk-Hat Sid supplemented.

"And the other boys! yes; it's quite as necessary that they should hold their places as I should hold mine. Fortunately the camp thinks well of us—of our crowd. So, it will not be as hard to regain the offices as it might otherwise be."

"But—" and he rubbed his chin reflectively, "if these new-comers should take a notion to put *their* fingers into the pie, it mightn't be such an easy job. In fact, I'm half afraid it would be a deucedly hard one."

"We'll have to imitate the useful and busy bee," Sid characteristically commented. "It would probably hustle us to be overly useful, but we could be as busy as a house afire, and attract a crowd about us as effectively."

"So we will—and must."

"And take a lesson from the Hummer," Sid laughingly continued. "He's faken a pair of cuckoo wings for his heraldic crest. Why not go him one better, and adopt the bee-hive of the saintly Mormons?"

Pendergast frowned. He was in too serious a mood to enjoy levity, and Silk-Hat Sid's joking air irritated him.

"We must get those offices!" he, however, went on, disdaining to make a verbal reply. "If we fail, the whole kit of us will have to pack our grips and seek fairer scenes and greener pastures. And that's something I don't care to do, just now, for I'm very comfortably situated, thank you."

"And success means big money to us. Bigger money than it has ever meant before. As the lamented Mulberry Sellers would probably say: 'There's millions in it!'"

"We'll do it!" Sid asserted, complacently. "Trust us to that. 'In the bright lexicon of the—the—gambling fraternity—there's no such word as fail!'"

Pendergast looked up quickly, and might have again reproved his volatile companion, but the conversation was interrupted by a sharp rap on the door and the quick entrance of a man.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAN OF ROCK.

AT about the same hour a man was sitting alone in a small and poorly-furnished room in another part of the town. Aside from the poor furnishings, the room itself was not an attractive one, for there were chinks here and there in the walls, and these let in the chill of the night air. But the occupant seemingly paid no heed to this.

He was seated before, and bending over, a stand on which were writing materials. He was making no use of these, however—being apparently absorbed in reverie.

He has been presented to the reader before, though no description was then given of his personal appearance. He was tall, somewhat thin, and very much stoop-shouldered. His hair and beard were dark and heavy, and worn long.

He was, in truth, the passenger of the stage-coach adventure; and was, also, the man known to the citizens of Cuckoo as Old Adamant, the Man of Rock, and whose coming had so disturbed the serenity of Judge Pendergast and his gambling friends.

There was in the appearance of Old Adamant much to suggest why the title had been conferred on him, for that any man had been so baptized by his parents is incredible. The title adjunct, "the Man of Rock," was in itself explanatory. The firm set of the jaws, noticeable even under the heavy beard, the aggressive, resolute chin; the high, straight forehead; the deep, steel-gray eyes; all added their testimony to the fitness of the appellation.

Without any apparent change in his attitude or manner, he pushed his hand softly into the drawer of the little stand. It came out like a flash, and in it was gripped a heavy pistol, the one he had picked up near the splintered coach on the rocky shelf below the Hummingbird trail.

The cause of this sudden movement was soon made plain. He had seen an eye glued to one of the holes in the rear wall of the room, and intuition told him that the eye could belong to none other than a spy and an enemy.

The revolver was cocked and leveled with as much celerity as it had been drawn from the drawer, and was now pointed full at the eye peering in at the hole.

"Lie where you are, or I'll fire!" was his threatening language.

But the spy was seemingly more afraid of capture than of bullets, for he leaped to his feet with a startled cry, and made off.

"I must take a look at that fellow, and see where he goes!"

He dropped the cocked revolver into a pocket of his coat, seized his hat and slipped out into the night.

The man was scampering away as fast as a good pair of legs could carry him.

With a smile Adamant observed the direction he was taking, and hurried in pursuit, dropping as if by habit into the easy, swinging lope of the Indian runner.

When a couple of hundred yards had been passed over, the retreating spy perceptibly slackened his gait, and took time to look about him. The Man of Rock was nowhere visible, and with a sense of relief the spy continued on toward the center of the town.

If he had but known it, however, Old Adamant was at the time not fifty paces in his rear, and only screened from view by the darkness and the shrubbery; and when he went on, Adamant followed with the silence and persistence of a savage trailer.

As he approached the Cuckoo's Nest, the spy, feeling that he had not been followed, threw off all attempt at concealment.

Then Adamant saw his face fairly revealed beneath a street-lamp, and recognized him. It was none other than Blinky Jim.

A sigh of profound satisfaction escaped the pursuer at this knowledge.

"Aha! I thought your face would reveal something. It's a pity I didn't spoil it with a pistol ball. The murder of Alkali Abe would have been partially avenged, then."

Blinky Jim disappeared in the saloon; and, although Adamant did not directly follow him, he came close up to the door and glanced in. A pleased smile came to his face as he saw the spy mount the stairway and ascend to the second floor.

A few moments later, the pursuer mingled with a crowd of noisy miners and gained the interior of the Cuckoo's Nest without attracting attention. More miners came in immediately after, and the influx of these loud-talking additions to the crowd within the room so drew the general observation that Adamant had small difficulty in making his way unseen up the stairway.

With an unerring instinct—or was it instinct?—he advanced straight to the door of Pendergast's room: the room into which the spy had disappeared not five minutes before.

Adamant's movements were as noiseless as those of a cat; a thing remarkable considering his tall and somewhat awkward form. But there was scant danger of his being heard at that time, for the quartette of gamblers were busy in listening to and questioning Blinky Jim.

The corridor was but imperfectly lighted, yet, had there been any one present to observe, the illumination was sufficient to reveal the stern wrinkling of the high, straight forehead and the aggressive set of the firm jaws, as the Man of Rock bent to catch the words coming from within.

"So you've been fixing our heelers?" Pendergast questioned, looking at Blinky Jim so steadily that the latter winced and winked his eyes more rapidly than ever. It was this last peculiarity that had given Blinky his "handle." "You've been posting them as to the character of their supposed new friends, the Hummer from Hummingbird and the Man of Rock?"

"K'rect ye air, jedge," and Blinky tried to throw a smile into his face. "That's jes' w'ot I hev."

"And how do they take the news?"

"And they looked upon you as a messenger of light?" interposed Silk-Hat Sid, fumbling dudishly with his gold eye-glasses, and scarcely able to conceal his disdain for the coarsely-dressed spy.

"I'll do the talking for the crowd!" and there was a hard, stern look in Pendergast's eyes as he uttered the reproof.

The dudish gambler pressed a white hand against his lips, and coughed back a laugh.

"What did they have to say?" putting the query in a different form.

"Some on 'em said 't I wuz a dad-gasted fool; an' t'others 't I wuz slingin' truth like a reg'lar gospel sharp."

"For all of which you have my thanks, Blinky!" with a certain gratefulness in the tones very pleasing to the ears of the spy.

"And now, about the prisoner, Ralph Raymond?"

"Snug an' sound as ye please. I lef' 'im tied up at the cabin, with Jed a-settin' afore the door o' it. Oh, he's all right, Ralph is."

A strange look came into Adamant's deep, gray eyes as he listened to this question and reply; a look that showed he was amused or pleased, or perhaps both.

"Yes; Jed were a-settin' afore the door of the cabin, a-smokin' his pipe an' a-starin' at the sunset. He's a master hand to stare at the sunset, sometimes, is Jed—especially when he's a-feelin' good. An' Jed's nigh about al'ays a-feelin' good jes' d'rec'ly after supper-time."

There was a supercilious look on the face of

Silk-Hat Sid; but fearing the displeasure of his chief, he maintained a discreet silence, although aching to interject one of his characteristic sentences.

"I believe you handcuff 'im and tie him up snug and sound whenever you both have occasion to leave at the same time?"

"We never fergits orders, jedge!" picking up his hat as if he had told his story and stood ready to go.

And Old Adamant, observing this, crept quietly down the stairway and out into the street, and managed it so deftly that few knew he had been in the building.

CHAPTER VIII.

CROCODILE TEARS.

BLINKY JIM had said nothing about his late visit to Adamant's room, or of how he had been caught in the act of spying. Possibly he thought it would not greatly raise him in the estimation of Judge Pendergast, should these facts be made known. Pendergast was a man lavish in his praise of successful work, but extremely severe in his condemnation of those who failed in its performance.

However this may be, he would very likely not have been in so cheerful a frame of mind if Blinky Jim had spoken of this. For, to do the judge justice, he was as crafty and wise as the fabled fox, and must at once have jumped to the conclusion that the spy would be followed by Adamant.

The quartette did not long remain in conference after the departure of Blinky Jim. The judge had already expressed his unwillingness to play further; and the subjects of conversation in which they were interested were pretty well exhausted. Besides, the time for heavy gaming below stairs had arrived, and Pendergast's trio of friends were anxious to bear a hand at the gaming-tables.

But the judge was not in a mood for play that night; and when the little party broke up he drew his hat well down over his eyes and passed from the stifling atmosphere of the Cuckoo's Nest out into the open air.

For more than an hour he strode up and down the street, his hands behind him under the tails of his coat, and his chin upon his breast. But for the stern lines in his face and the marks of dissipation, one might easily have mistaken him for a dominie thinking out his sermon for the coming Sunday, for the white hair and mustache gave him a reverential aspect.

There was little of peace and good-will, however, in Pendergast's thoughts that night. He felt that danger lay in wait for him: danger the more to be dreaded because its sources were in a measure masked and unknown.

Why had the Man of Rock returned? and who was this Hummer from Hummingbird? He had made inquiry concerning the latter—inquiry of fast friends and allies in the town of Hummingbird itself. And the reply had been that Hike Hartsook was to them an unknown quantity—that he had been in the town only a few days, and his antecedents could not be traced.

Hence, Judge Lemuel Pendergast was much disturbed in mind.

He had put the Hummer down as an enemy when first he saw him, and Lariat Bill's failure had been a sore disappointment. And this disappointment became as gall and wormwood when the hostler accepted Hartsook's hand and announced himself as his friend.

The hour was growing late, although the gaming and excitement in the Cuckoo's Nest were at the highest, when Pendergast took his way thoughtfully homeward.

He admitted himself with a night-key, and was about to pass directly to his bed-chamber, when he was arrested by the voice of his daughter.

He had observed the gleam of a lamp in her room, and frowned thereat; for, although Pendergast himself was as late a bird as ever wandered the night, he strenuously objected to his daughter keeping late hours.

He stopped and turned back as she opened the door of the sitting-room and spoke to him.

"Have you—have you heard anything, father?"

Her tones were low, and there was a noticeable tremor in them.

Pendergast removed his hat and entered the room with her before replying.

The contrast between the two was most marked. She was fresh and fair, with brown hair and blue eyes; and as she stood by him, it seemed like the meeting of frosty winter with blooming spring. But, this did not constitute the chief dissimilarity. Her face expressed girlish purity, while upon his, villainy and debauchery had set their imperishable seal.

"I'm sorry to say, I've heard nothing. I presume by your question, that you refer to Ralph Raymond?"

His voice told her the subject was distasteful to him, and there came into her eyes a little flash of resentment as she replied:

"Yes, father; who else should I mean?"

There was a bit of history back of these words.

Some three months before, Ralph Raymond, a young man of prepossessing appearance, had

visited Cuckoo. He had liked the place or claimed to, and had tarried week after week.

Probably the chief cause of this had been Pendergast's daughter, Edith. Young Raymond had gained the good-will of the judge, and had been by him invited to his house. In this way began an acquaintance, which quickly ripened into a feeling much warmer than mere friendship.

Then, to his discomfiture, Pendergast discovered that the man who had claimed his friendship and gained the love of his daughter was a detective known far and near as one of the most dangerous men in the Secret Service.

The knowledge had come as a thunderbolt. Raymond had so wormed himself into the judge's confidence, thereby gaining many secrets whose disclosure would be most perilous, that the latter had become frightened and desperate.

He was very loth, at first, to believe the reports against Raymond, though made by one of his most trusted agents. But the reports were backed by proofs so overwhelming that doubt became changed into certainty.

Therefore, regardless of the feelings of his daughter, Pendergast had had this new enemy spirited away, and he was the man whom Blinky Jim had reported as safe in the cabin in the hills.

"Oh, do you think you will ever find any traces of him?" and the flash died out of the eyes, to be replaced by a suggestion of tears.

"I'm sure I hope so, Edith," and Pendergast attempted to throw as much sympathy into his voice as possible. "I've already spent a great deal of money in the search, and I am willing to spend more. It's difficult to know just what to do. He disappeared, you see, as completely and mysteriously as if the earth had opened and swallowed him. In such a case there is no starting point; no beginning of the trail, so to speak."

The fiery flash was returning to the blue eyes of the girl.

"I know he isn't dead!" she asserted. "And I know that he has been deprived of his liberty for a purpose."

Pendergast glanced at her furtively, wondering if these statements represented knowledge or mere guess-work. How much had Raymond told her? or had he told her anything?"

"I'm sure I'm doing all I can!" the judge protested. "I've employed some of the best detectives in the West. What more would you have me do?" and again he glanced up with that furtive expression, anxious to note if the word "detectives" had any apparent effect on her. But he observed nothing to arouse distrust.

"I presume that's all you can do. But I am so satisfied of the truth of what I stated that I intended to begin the search myself. Detectives may not always wish to do the thing they are hired to do and may make a pretense of searching though they do not search at all. It may be so in this instance."

There was an earnestness in her manner that alarmed the judge.

"I trust you will not do anything foolish, Edith!" remonstratingly. "This is a wild camp, you must remember, and people will wag their tongues."

"I have thought of all that, and counted the cost," was the resolute and earnest reply. "But I shall do nothing unwomanly. Be assured of that."

"But I don't think it's the proper thing for you to do anything at all. What more can you do than I have done, and am doing?"

"That's to be tested. Perhaps nothing; I'm sure I can't tell, yet. But I mean to do something!"

"I almost feel like commanding you to let the matter alone!"

He felt he was treading on shaky ground, here, and modulated his voice to a coaxing whine. "I really do, Edith!"

"There are a lot of villains in this town," she continued, paying no heed to his protest, "who, I am sure have abundant reasons for wishing Mr. Raymond out of the way. This is not merely guess-work. Some of those men I intend to have watched, and watched so closely that the truth must be revealed."

Having uttered this defiant outburst, and the spirit that gave it birth having in a measure vanished, the color again ebbed from Edith's cheek and her eyes became suffused with tears.

"Believe me, Edith," and his white handkerchief came out sympathetically, "I feel deeply for you. I would do anything in the world to aid you. I have done all I could, as I said, and shall do more. You have but to command me."

He applied the handkerchief to his eyes, choked down a sob, and blew his nose violently.

"You have had my sympathy from the first. I understood fully the relations existing between you and Mr. Raymond. He had even spoken to me on the subject."

Her only reply was a sob; and believing he had sufficiently impressed on her the heights and depths of his fatherly affection, he took himself discreetly from the room.

He angrily shook the folds out of his handkerchief, however, as he proceeded toward his bed-chamber, thrust it vehemently into his pocket, and hissed through his closed teeth:

"The tiger cat! I'm afraid she's going to make me trouble. If she does, I'll have to take measures to clip her claws."

CHAPTER IX.

LARIAT BILL FALLS IN LOVE.

LARIAT BILL leaned languishingly against the bar of the Cuckoo's Nest. There was a marked change in his dress and manner. Heretofore he had been careless in his attire and inclined to be negligent of his personal appearance. Now he seemed to be trying to ape the dapper spruceness of Silk-Hat Sid. There were no gold eye-glasses, and the softness and whiteness of the hands, and the effeminacy of the features were necessarily absent. But the dress of the hostler was neat and clean; a new hat of the broad-brimmed, cowboy variety adorned his head; a flashing necktie made his shirt-front radiant; and the polish on his heavy boots represented an expenditure of much elbow-grease.

All this change was not without its cause. The Cuckoo's Nest was now graced by a barmaid;—Miss Betty Blessington, by name. She was a bright and vivacious little beauty, with eyes of the blackest, and hair of a dull, ebony hue.

Black-eyed Bess, she was called by her employer, Arkansaw Tom, and by the frequenters of the place.

Lariat Bill's languishing looks were directed toward Miss Betty who was moving busily about behind the bar arranging the array of glasses so that the light from the chandeliers should be reflected from them in the most attractive way.

The hour was extremely late; and the *habitués* of the Cuckoo's Nest had gone their several ways, even the last drunken brawler having been ejected a half-hour before by Arkansaw.

Still, Lariat Bill lingered, anxious for a parting word with pretty Betty Blessington ere he retired to his cubby-hole of a sleeping apartment above Judge Pendergast's stable.

"If ye would on'y jes' let that black hair float out, like a hoss's mane, ye know, 'twould look beautifuller by a good 'eal. It shines so much like silk 't I don't see what in the worl' ye want to tie it up that way fer an' hide it."

"Thank ye for the compliment, Mr. Jackson!" and she gave her head a saucy toss and poked at a row of glasses until they jingled musically.

"So my hair is like a horse's mane, is it?"

"Meanin' no offense!" with a deprecatory scrape of the foot and an upward lifting of the tremendously heavy hat. "'Ceptin' of your hair, they ain't anything in that line much purtier than a hoss's mane; specially if it's coaly black, and 's been tended to proper. Floatin' in the wind, an' with the sun shinin' on it, it's a reg'larglory."

The tones revealed how sincere was the tribute.

"I'll not treasure it against ye, then!" and she showed her teeth in a fascinating smile.

"I don't 'low I'm called on to be afraid 't you'll rec'lect anything I say more'n a minute after the words is spoke," declared Lariat Bill.

"Ye never do. Hyer I've been tellin' ye how day-goned handsome ye air, fer more'n a week. Might's well pour water on a duck's back, too. You've either lost your remembrance, or hain't got any years to hear with."

"An' so I reckon I'll haf' to say it all over ag'in!"

"Oh, don't!" putting up her hands to exclude the words.

"But I must," the hostler averred. "It's a-b'ilin' up in my heart, now, an' makin' it thump so that I'm afraid it'll jump clean out of my buzzum. You'd feel shaky, now, if it should, an' go a-bobbin' over the floor a bouncin' baseball."

"There ain't the slightest danger, Mr. Jackson. No doubt you've talked that way to a good many other girls besides me; and your heart still seems to be in the right place."

"Honest Injun, I never!" and he laid a big, brown hand on his heaving breast. "You're the fu'st an' the on'y one."

And he cast his eyes to the ceiling.

"What is that verse o' poetry what I used to hear?"

"The rose is red—"

"No, hang it, that ain't the one! Le's see; I'm shore it begins with 'Oh.'"

He teetered on one foot and swayed so alarmingly that Miss Betty was half afraid he might tumble over.

"Now I've got it!" removing his hat and running his hand through his hair. "It's a slap-up good sentiment, too:

"Oh, very deep is daddy's well,
An' deeper is th' sea;
But deeper in my buzzum dwells
The love I bear fer thee!"

He closed the quotation with an amorous glance, and again bent over the bar.

"Hang it, Betty; I say, let's git married! What's the use o' beatin' around the bush an' shilly-shallyin'? Sense the fu'st time I seen ye, I've been a-lovin' ye harder'n a mule kin kick. Le's set up housekeepin' together; what d'ye say?"

"I say you oughtn't to talk that way, when

you haven't knowed me more than a week. If I didn't know better, I'd think you'd been drinkin'."

There was a hot flush on the bar-maid's cheeks, showing she had not been indifferent to the hostler's declarations.

"And there's one thing, Mr. Jackson!" and she faced about, looked him full in the eyes and shook a forefinger warningly: "If you think half as much of me as you say you do, and expect me to ever care anything for you, you've got to let liquor strictly alone. Sounds funny, does it, from a bar-maid?"

"I've already taken my 'davy on that," the hostler declared. "I hain't teched a drop sense you've been hyer; an' that's the honest truth. An' I don't 'low to tech another drop so long's my name's Bill Jackson!"

"I suppose a bar-maid ain't expected to be particular about a thing like that. Maybe I'm an uncommon kind of bar-maid. But that's neither here nor there. I long ago made up my mind that I'd never have anything to do with a man that drinks."

"I'll put that in my pipe an' smoke it," Lariat promised. "I can't say't I blame ye; fer I recollect that the last time I did fill up, I made the plaguiest fool o' myself of any man ever borned."

"I know about that," and Betty frowned severely. "You was a fool that time, and no mistake."

"Weren't so well acquainted with the Hummer, then, as I am to-night. If I had 'a' been, I'd 'a' left my rope at home, shore."

Betty beamed at him knowingly. "You'll get better acquainted with the gentleman, by and by."

She was about to speak further, perhaps in praise of Hartsook, when Lariat Bill checked her.

"The Hummer's all right, but we kin talk about him some other time. Jist now, I'd rather sling chin music about a better lookin' person—a person what I've got my eye on, this minute. Per'aps if you'll put your thinkin' cap on, you'll recollect that you didn't answer the questions I asked ye awhile ago."

"And I'm not ready to answer them now, either."

She turned again and began to fiddle with the glasses.

"Jist a kiss, anyhow," the awkward fellow pleaded, looking around to be sure no one else was in the room.

"Well, I won't, then!" with a snap of the black eyes.

"Not if I spout some more poetry?" and he laughed.

"You couldn't hire me to, not if you talked poetry for a month; especially that kind of poetry. I'm not partial to poetry, anyway!"

"And, now, if you want me to think well of you, and particularly if you want me to look well to-morrow, you'll pack yourself off home. It's getting most awful late, and I've been on my feet for a week, it seems like."

The hostler was not pleased with this, though he could not deny the reasonableness of the request.

"An' you won't say a blame thing to keep my heart frum jumpin' out onto the floor?"

"Not this time. You must first be a good boy and keep early hours, which you can't do a-chatterin' here when it's nearly morning. So, go now; for Arkansaw will be down in a few minutes to put up the shutters and tumble into the street them that don't go sooner."

And Lariat Bill averring that a hint was as good as a "hoss-kick," betook himself from the establishment presided over by his charmer.

CHAPTER X.

EDITH RECEIVES A LETTER.

LOVE for the bar-maid had become the hostler's absorbing passion. Waking or sleeping, she was ever in his mind; and he went home that night to dream of her; and to think of her, almost to the exclusion of everything else, the next day.

Next to his love for Betty, was his love for the horses intrusted to his care. There were a stable full of them; all fine animals, for the judge was an enthusiastic admirer of horse-flesh. Many of them were speedy, too, and had won for their owner well-nigh princely sums on the race-course.

On the morning following his conversation with the bar-maid, Lariat Bill was in Pendergast's stables, busily engaged in attending to the animals. To him they were almost reasoning creatures, capable of understanding his words, and of affectionate sympathy.

"I 'low I'll haf to be careful, of how I act toward her," he whispered, as he applied the brush to a favorite filly. "She's as skittish as some hosses I know; an' is li'ble to take the bit in her teeth an' go a-plungin'."

The filly turned her head about, and looked at him as if she knew the remarks were addressed to her.

This filly was one of the handsomest animals in the stable, and the hostler had taken the privilege of re-naming her "Betty." It was something he had not mentioned, though, even to Pendergast. Neither did he intend to. It was not necessary, he argued, for the world to

know he called the filly Betty. On the contrary, quite unnecessary. The name was for him alone.

"Yes, she's skittish, the bar-maid is, skittish as you air, Betty. An' she's purty, too, purty as a picter. A purty woman an' a purty hoss jist lays it over everything fer reel beauty, 'cordin' to my notion. It jist beats the world!"

He stopped, and what it was that beat the world may never be known, for a shadow darkening the doorway had caught his attention.

He turned from his work to see the slight form of Hartsook. There was merriment visible in the blue eyes of the Hummer. He had removed the hat with the cuckoo's wings, and held it in his hand.

"Some one with you, eh?"

"N-o!" confusedly. "I wuz jist a-talkin' to these hyer hosses. Got more sense 'n some men have, too."

The Hummer from Hummingbird had been lifted to a high position in the estimation of Lariat Bill by his promptness, quickness and bravery on the occasion of their ever-memorable first meeting.

His admiration for this new hero was quite as overpowering in its way as was his love for the new bar-maid; and in consequence, during the short time that had elapsed, they had become intimates and fast friends. The very fact that they were so dissimilar in everything seemed a mutual bond of attraction.

"I haven't any doubt that you are entirely correct in that, for some men are precious fools!" and Hartsook smiled sweetly, as he replaced the hat on his head. "Which is a good thing for the rest of the tribe. If all men were equally smart, the business of a good many of us would be knocked into pi."

"Come frum the Cuckoo's Nest?"

"I'm sorry to have to say that I haven't seen Miss Betty this morning."

Lariat Bill flushed, for he was not prepared for this ready probing of his secret thoughts.

"It's all right," and the Hummer shook his long, blonde hair merrily. "If the gentle maiden was fancy free—by which I mean to say, if you hadn't stepped in before me—I should have felt like bowing down before the same altar. As it is, I presume I shall have to hunt up some other shrine, or forego such devotions."

"Oh, shet up!" and Lariat Bill drew his stalwart form erect. "If ye don't, I shall haf to hit ye."

The Hummer made no reply, but stepped close up to him.

"I'm down here on a little business, Lariat, and I think you can help me. The fact is, I want to see Miss Edith Pendergast. Could a little conference with her be arranged without the judge being the wiser?"

The stalwart hostler thrust his tongue into his cheek and winked knowingly, before replying.

"On p'tic'lar business, I s'pose?"

"You are off there, Lariat," again removing the bell-crowned hat, and squinting at the wings. "I'm the Hummer from Hummingbird, but I'm not flutterin' my bejeweled wings around every rosebud that grows in this garden of the gods. Because you've tumbled head over ears into the delightful pool of love-sickness, don't go to fancyin' that everybody else is in the same fix. Business before pleasure, my dear Lariat—always!"

The hostler shifted awkwardly on his heavy feet.

"You're allus a-bittin' a fellér straight atween the eyes, Hartsook," he protested. "You ought to quit it. It 'minds me too much o' the fu'st day I met ye."

"A fellow can hit harder with words than with boxing gloves," the Hummer confessed. "But I am apt to chatter a good deal, and you mustn't always take me too seriously."

"But about this little piece of business?—for it's straight business, sure, and nothing else! Miss Edith is in the house, I presume? If so, and you'll just pilot me thitherward, I'll be your everlasting and most obedient servant."

The hostler looked up the street to make sure the judge was not coming, then led the way in the direction of the house.

It was one of the best buildings in Cuckoo; two stories in height, with a basement; and with many of the modern improvements.

Into the house and up the stairway the hostler passed, Hartsook following close at his heels.

"Have you anything in the shape of a keerd?" Lariat questioned, halting in the upper corridor.

The Hummer drew a visiting card from a pocket and wrote upon it in pencil, "Hike Hartsook."

With this in his hand, held gingerly between his fingers, the hostler advanced to the door of Edith's room and knocked.

It was shortly opened.

"A keerd, miss. Gentleman's a-waitin'."

Holding his hat as if afraid it would escape him, he bowed with all the urbanity at his command.

Edith was arrayed in a simple morning toilet, and never looked fairer.

"Show the gentleman into the parlor," she commanded. "I will be down in a moment."

Hartsook felt a little confused at retreating in this fashion, and inclined to blame Lariat Bill for his awkwardness; but he discreetly held his peace.

He had not long to wait in the pleasant little parlor until Edith made her appearance.

She seemed to have met him before and greeted him cordially.

"A letter, miss," he said, taking a folded sheet from his pocket. "It's from Old Adamant."

A sudden pallor came into the girl's face as she read it.

It ran:

"MISS PENDERGAST:—

"I take the liberty of sending this to you by the hand of Mr. Hike Hartsook. I know you are much interested in the fate of Ralph Raymond. I can assure you from personal knowledge, that he is alive and well; and you may therefore relieve your mind of all anxiety on that score. Of course you desire to aid him, and this is to inform you that I have a plan whereby that may be accomplished. Your part of the work is simple; and yet, simple as it is, it may require an unusual amount of courage in the performance. It is this: You are to obey Mr. Hartsook implicitly. Not only that, but you must find means to induce Lariat Bill to do likewise. And all this, even should it become necessary, to turn against your own father in doing it."

It was signed merely "Old Adamant."

"I understand," she said, looking at the Hummer with eyes that shone like stars. "I understand; and am ready to obey."

Hartsook smiled.

"I'd advise you, Miss Pendergast, to burn that letter this instant. You are to obey me in all things, you know; and that is my first command."

She obediently lighted a small hand-lamp which stood on the stand, and while her cheeks burned painfully, held the letter in the flame of the lamp until it turned to ashes. These she gathered up and threw into the grate.

"Your first command has been obeyed!" facing smilingly toward him.

"And you await my further pleasure? It's a delightful sensation, Miss Edith, to realize that one's will is law unto another. It makes me envious of the old Caliphs and Doges."

"This Old Adamant, how—how long has he been in town?" paying slight attention to his light comment.

"Not long; only a day or two."

"And what is it he particularly wants me to do?"

"Very little, at present; very probably a great deal by and by. His first anxiety was to communicate with you and put you on your guard. What is to be done later, time must develop."

"I should say, however, that your first act would be to open the ears of Lariat Bill for a kindly reception of the truth, and prepare him to become as wax in the hands of the wearer of the cuckoo's wings. There isn't a better man in the country than Lariat Bill, if he is just started right. What a magnificent specimen of physical development he is, even if a little awkward on his feet. The awkwardness disappears as soon as he mounts a horse. And how he can swing a rope!"

Hartsook's face glowed with admiration.

"He is a lion, on occasion; but you can tame him, Miss Pendergast, without a doubt. And tame him, you must."

"And now, allow me to bid you good-morning, as I have other matters demanding immediate attention."

"And you may assure Old Adamant," giving him his bewinged hat, as he arose to depart, "that I think I understand the necessity of caution; and that I thank him much for his letter, and shall do as he says."

"Even to going against your father, should it become necessary?"

"Even to going against my father!"

CHAPTER XI.

A LOVELORN LASS.

As he was turning toward the outer door, Hartsook encountered Lariat Bill. The hostler had taken a position where he could see up the main street, and was watching to convey warning to his new friend should the judge leave in sight.

"Miss Pendergast wishes to see you, I think," and the Hummer jerked a thumb in the direction of the parlor.

Lariat Bill disappeared, and Hartsook was about to depart from the house, when a voice called to him:

"Oh, Mr. Hummer! Be you fond of cookies? I've some reel nice ones here. Jist tuck 'em out of the oven."

A shade of annoyance came to the Hummer's usually pleasant face.

It was Pendergast's servant and maid-of-all-work who had called to him. She had chanced to meet him at a ball, and was presuming upon the acquaintance made at that time, for in a town like Cuckoo all nice distinctions of social standing and caste are obliterated.

Mollie Stubbs she was, by name—a girl of democratic proclivities—believing that all men (and especially all women) are created free and

equal, and remain so to their dying days in spite of all fluctuations of fortune.

She had observed the Hummer when Lariat Bill piloted him into the house, and being in a not very presentable condition, fled incontinently to the depths of the kitchen. But her courage had returned when he disappeared, and she proceeded to array herself, as far as her wardrobe would permit, in purple and fine linen.

She was far from handsome, although she fancied herself quite a beauty. Her nose was a decided pug, her hair sandy and wispy, her eyes light and shifting, and her really fair complexion marred by patches of freckles. These last she had endeavored to cover by liberal applications of face powder.

There was a white splotch of this on the side of her nose, as she temptingly held up the pan of cookies for Hartsook's admiration.

It was not in the Hummer's nature to be uncivil, so he turned back with as good grace as he could.

"They are reel nice, Mr. Hummer, I think!" and she took one from the pan and gave it to him. "Jist set yer teeth in that and tell me if it ain't so. It does a body good to see you ag'in—specially here, where I never expected to see you."

There was a conscious look in the light eyes as she posed thus before Hartsook, wondering, as she held out the cooky, if her dress set becomingly.

For Mollie Stubbs had become greatly enamored of the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Hummer from Hummingbird; so much enamored, in fact, that in the secrecy of her chamber, after the ball, she had whispered to herself that it was a case of love at first sight; and hugged to her bosom the fond hope that the attachment might be mutual.

"It's as good cooking as I ever ate," he declared, as he munched the cake.

And in this he did not lie; for Mollie Stubbs was indeed a famous cook.

The freckled face colored beneath the abundant powder, at this compliment.

"I knowed you'd like it," she purred. "I always could make cakes. I'm called on, I believe, to make half the weddin' cakes for the county."

The light eyes glanced at him covertly. "I do like to 'ten' weddin's, an' balls."

The Hummer laughed lightly, shaking the blonde hair until the sunlight on it seemed to change it into gold.

"They are pleasant. Another cooky, if you please, Miss Stubbs. Pleasant indeed! The world couldn't vell get on without them—particularly the weddings."

"I never wuz a bridesmaid but onc't," Miss Stubbs simpered. "But 'twuz a reel stunnin' weddin'. I hardly ever expect to have a weddin' of my own. They's so many upstart girls, now, what thinks they're everything jist because their pa's got a little money."

She glanced meaningly in the direction of the parlor.

"An' pertends they're a good deal younger than some other folks. But, la! if they only would tell their age. Funny how 'fraid some women are of tellin' their ages. Now, me: I never wuz ashamed to own how old I am. You wouldn't think me old, now, would you, Mr. Hummer?"

A bored look had come into Hartsook's face. "Not over twenty, I should say!" gallantly scaling down his judgment by at least fifteen years.

Miss Stubbs gave vent to a cackling laugh of delight.

"Now, did you really think that? Well, as I said, I ain't ashamed to own my age. If I live till next Aprile, I'll be twenty-two. Makes me feel like I'm gettin' old. My mother was married at sixteen."

Hartsook could stand no more.

"Another cooky, if you please. They are so excellent. I'll eat it as I go along; for I really must be going."

"La! In such a hurry? I've got some reel nice rolls in the oven. They're awful good, I think, with maple syrup; an' the judge sent down some first class syrup, last night."

"You are very kin'," Hartsook declared, settling his hat on his head. "I know I should like the rolls. But time presses, and I've a raft of work before me to-day."

He took out his watch and glanced nervously at it.

"The cooky will do, thank you!" seeing that she was about to produce the rolls in spite of his protests. "We'll discuss the rolls some other time."

It was an unlucky statement.

"You couldn't come this evenin', or to-morrow, I suppose? You'd be reel welcome."

But the Hummer sturdily refused to be ogled into any promises, and feeling very hot and very uncomfortable he managed to extricate himself from the house.

"Ye gods!" he exclaimed, mopping his face. "That woman would run a man mad. If I'd stayed there another ten minutes, she'd have married me in spite of myself."

While this conversation was being had in the region of the kitchen, Edith Pendergast was

closely questioning Lariat Bill concerning the Hummer, and was receiving reports the most enthusiastic.

"The Hummer? Why, he's a Jim dandy! All the boys swears by 'im. He's quicker on the shoot 'n any man I ever see. How he kin handle a gun!"

To Lariat's mind these abilities were the highest qualities of manhood.

The natural color had returned to Edith's cheeks, and the smile with which she listened to the hostler's encomiums was very charming. Probably she did not agree with him in his estimation of what it takes to constitute heroic manhood; but such thoughts as she had on the subject she wisely kept to herself.

"I'm glad you like him," she averred. "You knew Ralph Raymond?"

"He wuz a gen'leman, ever' inch uv 'im."

"You're aware, of course, that he has been missing for some time?"

The hostler nodded assent.

"Mr. Hartsook brought me a letter which assures me that he is alive and well. But he is in need of help. Just what is necessary to be done, only Mr. Hartsook can say. You value my friendship, Mr. Jackson?"

"I do!" the hostler asserted with much sincerity.

"I have never doubted it. If you would increase that friendship and confer a signal service on Mr. Raymond, you will obey whatever commands Mr. Hartsook may lay on you. You will do this, even if those commands should make it necessary to disobey the instructions of my father."

Lariat Bill opened his eyes in genuine surprise, and shifted uneasily.

The gaze was returned; and there was in the look she bent on him so much earnest entreaty that the little rebellion that had stirred in his heart was instantly quelled.

"It's in a just cause!" she assured. "You may know I would never ask you to do anything but what is right, and which my conscience approves. Whatever doubts you may have will disappear, I dare say, as soon you have had opportunity to converse fully with Mr. Hartsook."

"What I ask now is your promise to aid him to the best of your ability in a just undertaking. The moment he passes the bounds of what is right and proper, you are at liberty to leave him. And you are not to give in your full adhesion until you are convinced of the righteousness of the work to be done. Does that satisfy you?"

"Perfectly, miss!" declared the honest fellow, casting his allegiance into the new scale even before he fully comprehended the character of the tasks to be performed. "I'll talk with the Hummer; an' I'll be with him, don't you never fear, jist as soon as he's ready fer biz!"

"I knew you would say that!" the tears welling to her eyes. "May God bless you and help you, Lariat! You will need His strength in the work before you; for I much fear it will be a work full of peril."

CHAPTER XII.

OLD ADAMANT TAKES A STAND.

THE morning following these interviews held in store a great surprise for Judge Lemuel Pendergast. It came immediately after breakfast, as he unfolded his morning paper to note the doings of the day—for Cuckoo was metropolitan in many things, and boasted a small daily.

The surprise was contained in the column devoted to political announcements. There were only a few words, but they were sufficient to fill the judge with fear and anxiety:

"At the solicitation of many friends I hereby announce myself as a candidate for Police Judge of the City of Cuckoo. ADAMANT ROCK."

Thus Pendergast read, fuming inwardly at the thought of being opposed by the Man of Rock.

He did not read further; but tossed the paper on the floor and hurriedly left the house.

As was to be expected he directed his steps toward Arkansaw Tom's establishment.

"Have you seen the Cuckoo Note?" he asked of the proprietor, picking up a copy of the paper and laying it on the bar.

Arkansaw Tom opened his eyes in considerable surprise as he spelled out the offending paragraph indicated by the judge's forefinger.

"Goin' to run ag'in' ye, eh?"

"But did you notice the signature?" Pendergast queried. "It's signed Adamant Rock. It can't mean any one else than Old Adamant. But I'll bet the best horse in my stable that that isn't his real name signed there."

The point was lost on Arkansaw.

"It don't make much difference, I reckon, whether it's his real name er not. Anyway, it wouldn't do no good to kick up a row about a thing like that. There's too many men in this town who've sailed so long under false names that they've plumb forgot the ones their mam-mies give 'em."

The judge winced a little; for, although Arkansaw may not have known it, the thrust was a direct one.

"What air ye goin' to do about it?" he continued.

Instead of replying the judge gave an exclamation of surprise. He had opened the paper to the columns under the head of "City News." This is what he saw there, and it did not tend to restore his equanimity:

"Adamant Rock will address the citizens of Cuckoo, at the City Hall, at 2 P. M., to-day. Every one interested in the good government and welfare of our beautiful little city is most cordially and earnestly invited to attend, without regard to past party affiliations."

He read it aloud to Arkansaw.

"Looks like the feller meant bizness!" the latter commented. "What in thunder's he up to, ye reckon?"

"You're a fool, Arkansaw!" and there was deep disgust in the judge's tones. "Can't you see that it means danger to us? danger of the worst kind? If you can't, you haven't as much sense as a pigeon!"

Arkansaw accepted the rebuke with good grace.

"Of course, if he beats ye—"

"If I'm defeated, all the rest of the boys will be defeated; and you probably know what that means."

"Is there any way to head 'im off?"

"I don't know. I haven't had time for thought. I only know we are in danger. Keep our fellows away from the meeting, as much as you can. A small crowd will hurt Adamant as much as anything else. If we can make the people think that he is a weak candidate, he will really be one; for there are always a lot of fellows who want to vote with the winning side."

"There is one thing sure, though! I shall attend that meeting. I must hear what he has to say, for myself."

He disappeared up-stairs; and was not seen again until the hour for the gathering at the City Hall. Then, in company with Arkansaw, he wended his way thither.

A goodly number were there before them, and as the judge cast his eyes over the throng, his astonishment knew no bounds. For there, in the front row of chairs, were Edith and Lariat Bill!

"Do you see that?" he whispered, his face paling, as he tugged at Arkansaw's sleeve.

"It's yer darter," said Arkansaw, innocently enough.

The judge withheld further comment, deeming it useless to waste words on such a block-head; and contented himself with watching the new arrivals, and furtively glancing at Old Adamant, who, with the Hummer, occupied the speaker's stand.

The hour of two having at last arrived, the Hummer from Hummingbird smilingly got on his feet, shook out his blonde locks, and rapped for order.

Then, without more ado, he introduced Old Adamant to the assembly.

As the judge turned toward the Man of Rock, he noted one thing which he had not noted before. On the table in front of the speaker lay a pair of shining revolvers. The sight did not tend to restore his self-possession.

"The feller hain't left his grit behind 'im," Arkansaw whispered. "He allus did have a craw full o' sand, he did! He's a-goin' to have order in the choir, if he has to shoot somebody."

The judge was paying too much attention to the doings forward to catch in full the remarks of the proprietor of the Cuckoo's Nest.

"Gentlemen," and the tall, stooped form of Adamant drew every eye.

"And ladies," he continued, bowing toward Edith, who was the only female present. "I have asked you to come together to hear a discussion of matters in which every citizen of Cuckoo ought to take a deep interest."

He paused, while his steel-gray eyes earnestly searched the faces before him.

"My announcement in the paper this morning has told you that I am a candidate for the position of police judge. I am here to advocate my candidacy. I am glad the gentleman in opposition is present, as I do not wish to say anything behind his back that I would not say to his face."

He then began a scathing arraignment of the administration of justice as it had been conducted in the year drawing to a close. But he made no personal attack on Pendergast; that is, he did not especially single him out as a target. His speech was directed more against the gambling element, which had managed to get control of political affairs, than against the officers themselves.

"We have a curious penal code. It aims to have very little to do with the mere forms of law, but aims to attain strict justice and punish severely. It is modeled more after the style of the code of Judge Lynch than on the lines laid down by the statutes of the States. It is a law which may be very easily abused, and made the engine of oppression. Whether it has been used as the last, I shall not say; but that it has been woefully abused, few will have the hardihood to deny."

This statement was followed by a particularization of certain flagrant outrages. Well-

known criminals had gone unwhipped of justice; violations of the law had been openly winked at; and as a consequence the tough element of the camp had greatly increased in numbers, to the detriment of the interests of the better classes.

"I am responsible for my words," he asserted. "If any man has a controversy with me concerning the statements I have made, I am ready to settle it with him in his own way. To do so would not be a violation of our code, as I understand it."

There was a storm of applause when he sat down; and the bewildered judge saw, to his great anger, that the applause was joined in by Edith and Lariat Bill.

When the uproar had somewhat subsided, the Hummer came forward and added his words to those of Old Adamant. The speech was in his usual, oily, flowery vein, and was greeted with even more indications of pleasure than had been Adamant's, for Hartsook was a prime favorite.

Pendergast did not remain to hear the conclusion of the Hummer's remarks. He had grown sick at heart by all he had seen and listened to, and was oppressed by a sense of impending calamity; so, with a face so ghastly white that it almost matched in hue his snowy hair and beard, and with limbs shaking unsteadily, he stumbled down the stairway into the street.

"What did it all mean?" he vaguely asked himself. "Why was Edith there, applauding the sentences hurled at him and his friends? Was Lariat Bill drunk or crazy?"

No answer came to the self-asked queries; and with a mind in a state of chaos, and eyes that took no note of his surroundings, he hurried toward the Cuckoo's Nest, where, tossing off a glass of fiery liquor, he crept up to his room, to ponder over the events of the day.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STIRRING CHASE.

BOZEMAN JACK sat in the shade of a pinone and thoughtfully rubbed his stubby beard. He held in his hands a letter, over which he had been earnestly poring, for a good quarter of an hour.

His seat, a flat stone, was some distance removed from the camp-fire around which were gathered the major portion of his command. The shade of the pinone was his favorite place of retreat when harassed, or vexed by knotty problems. It secured him a degree of privacy not otherwise attainable in the rock-buttressed fortress.

As he read the letter for at least the tenth time, he wrinkled his brows, dark almost as a Mexican's, and uttered an oath under his breath.

The letter was from his mysterious chief, Captain Playfair, and set him a task to which he did not take kindly.

It revealed the fact that Captain Playfair was in sore need of money.

"I must have money, and at once!" it ran. "Our friend, the man who has so frequently befriended us, Judge Lemuel Pendergast, is a candidate for re-election to the judgeship of Cuckoo. He is opposed by a man known as Old Adamant—a man whom I know to be our dangerous foe, and who, if elected, will bring about our downfall and ruin."

It then elaborated a plan for securing the needed money, and bringing voters to Pendergast's aid. The instructions were explicit and imperative:

"You will take your men, or at least enough of them for the purpose, mask them well, and go in open day to the town of Hummingbird. Charge into the town whooping and yelling and firing your revolvers to cause the citizens to retreat to places of security. You must take the town by surprise, and make a quick, hurried dash. Strike at the hour of noon, when people will be at their dinners, and no one about the bank, for the bank is to be your object of attack. At that hour there is usually only one man in the bank. You ought to have no difficulty in overpowering him. Shoot him, if necessary. Then take the coin and bank-notes in the drawers and on the counter. You will probably get a thousand dollars. That is not much, but it will serve my present purposes."

When this had been done, the instructions stated, the party were to beat a retreat, without stopping to try to get the funds in the safe. There would be a pursuit, for the citizens would certainly gather as soon as the alarm was given, and a fight would probably ensue. If it did not come voluntarily, they were to force it.

There were two men in Bozeman's band. Denver Jake and Pawnee Bob, who had been residents of the town of Hummingbird, having left it some time before for their own good and the good of the camp.

These men were to be sacrificed.

The band being masked, none of them would be likely to be recognized. There were in Hummingbird many of the late associates of these men, and if Pawnee Bob and Denver Jake should be left dead in the streets, the people of Hummingbird would be naturally led to the conclusion that these associates had composed the raiding party.

Hence, a mob, or an organization of Vigilantes, would rise for the purpose of driving these men from the community. Forced to leave Hummingbird, they would naturally take refuge

in Cuckoo. Thus the rough element of the latter place would be augmented, and votes be added to those to be received by Judge Pendergast in the coming election.

"When this has been brought about, and such men or Hummingbird as would be likely to vote for our friend, have taken refuge in Cuckoo, then there is other work for you to perform. But first, you must make sure that a mob is raised in Hummingbird. All the gamblers, thieves, and men who live by their wits, must be made to leave there. It may be even necessary to hang a few to hasten their departure. I repeat, this mob must be raised, if it becomes needful for you to attend to it personally. In the role of a reformer a man may accomplish many things; and I know you will be equal to the emergency."

"When all this has been thoroughly and completely performed, you and your men must come to Cuckoo, and become, until after the election, citizens and voters of this camp."

Thus the communication ended; and a long and closely-written communication it was.

That Bozeman was not pleased with it, was very evident. As he read it over and over, to get the commands firmly fixed in his mind, he wrinkled his brows, puckered his lips, and rubbed his stubby beard more furiously than ever.

"Hang it all!" he growled. "What in thunder does Playfair want to give sich orders fer, anyway? Seems to me we could live an' move an' have our bein', an' go through pilgrims an' hearses in the good ole-fashioned way, 'thout mixin' up in this two-by-four political fight in Cuckoo. Let Judge Pendergast paddle his own boat; I ain't afeard but what we kin take keer o' our own selves without 'im!"

"An' then there's Bob an' Jake! 'Twill be a blame pity to lay out two good men like them. I'm half a notion to tell 'im that I'll be ripped open afore I'll do it."

He was interrupted in his meditations by an outcry that caused him to spring quickly to his feet.

The sounds came from beyond the rocky walls that hemmed in the camp, and through the opening between these walls, at the point where the sentinel was stationed, he saw his men pouring. They were armed, and seemed much excited.

"Something's wrong," he cried, running from beneath the pinone, and hailing the first man he met.

"The guard discovered a spy snoopin' around out there, an' they're a-tryin' to ketch 'im."

And with this hastily-given information, the man picked up his rifle, and hurried after his fellows without waiting for any orders from his chief.

"Some uv 'em ought to have stayed behind," Bozeman Jack muttered, glancing over the deserted camp. "That chap may be out there jist fer the purpose of drawin' 'em after him. There's no tellin'. These officers are sharp as steel-traps sometimes."

"Yes, that may be the game!" glancing apprehensively at the walls to his rear. "And, if they should have scalin' ladders an' come down them rocks, they'd nip us purty close."

His anxiety was so great on this score that he did not himself leave the inclosure, thinking it wise for some one to remain to give the alarm.

The sounds of the chase were every moment growing louder and louder and more furious, showing that the spy was being closely pressed. A rifle-shot came, also, now and then. This so increased Bozeman's excitement and interest, that he could no longer content himself as the mere sentry of a deserted camp. He must see, as well as hear.

Near the north wall of the inclosed area was a tall tree up which he sometimes sent men when it was desirable to have a survey made of the surrounding country. Even in this tree, however, the slopes beyond the west wall could not be seen.

Into this tree he climbed with all dispatch.

He could now observe the chase. The pursuers were not making so much noise, and the firing had ceased. The outlaws were spread out like a fan; while beyond was visible the form of the spy, as he climbed from rock to rock and from cover to cover.

"They'll git 'im!" Bozeman cried, unable to control his enthusiasm and pleasure. "They'll git 'im, shore, fer he's headin' into that draw, an' onc't he gits in there he's trapped."

The fleeing man was not familiar with the lay of the land, as was evidenced by Bozeman's statement. If he had been, he would have chosen another course. The route leading to the draw offered the best footing, and was therefore taken.

The spy vanished behind a rocky bend, and a number of the outlaws crowded close after.

Five minutes later, a yell of triumph announced that the chase had been brought to a finish.

"They've got him, or killed him, one," asseverated the chief, clambering down from his high perch and hastening toward the entrance.

It was not long until he met the men returning with their prisoner. The latter's face was scratched and his clothing torn, showing he had not surrendered without a struggle. The victory over him, too, had not been bloodless; for one of the outlaws was being borne back to camp on a stretcher.

The outlaw was not dead, however; though he

was severely wounded; the pistol ball having caught him in the side.

Two of the band had hastened on in advance to report to Bozeman their success.

"He fit like a tiger," one of them declared. "If we hadn't been so clost onto him, he'd 'a' sent a lot o' us over the divide. As 'twas, we crowded him so hard he didn't have much chance to use his gun; an' he never stopped to fight till he seen the cliffs afore 'im, an' know'd that he couldn't git out."

"Then, as I said, he pulled one of his guns, and give it to Mike Hanshaw before the rest uv us could jump onto him."

The party with the prisoner were at hand, now; and Bozeman Jack turned curiously to take a look at the man who had made such a bitter fight.

He knew him, and involuntarily uttered an exclamation of surprise.

The prisoner was Lariat Bill!

Bozeman recalled the fact that Lariat Bill was Judge Lemuel Pendergast's hostler, and remembering the statement in the letter that Pendergast was friendly to the band, was much mystified thereby.

CHAPTER XIV.

OUT OF THE TOILS.

How came Lariat Bill near the haunt of the outlaw band?

The explanation is simple:

The request made by Edith, followed by a conversation with the Hummer from Hummingbird, had been sufficient to firmly attach the honest fellow to the interests of Old Adamant. From that time forth, he had kept his eyes and ears open in behalf of the men whom he had now promised to serve.

In thus watching and listening, it chanced that he overheard Pendergast as the latter was engaged in giving instructions to the messenger who was to carry the letter to Bozeman Jack.

There was much in the talk very mysterious to Lariat, who was not yet thoroughly enlightened as to the perfidy of his employer; and he determined to investigate the matter for himself.

Hence, he kept close to the bearer of the letter, following him even into the depths of the hills, and up to the very confines of Bozeman Jack's stronghold.

It was while engaged in trying to get closer to this hidden retreat, and thus determine accurately what was to be seen behind the frowning walls, that he was discovered by the sentinel.

Chase was at once given when his presence was revealed, resulting in his capture, as we have seen.

As soon as the road-agent chief saw who was the man thus fallen into his hands, he began to issue some sharp and peremptory orders.

"You, Jake and Bob, stay with me and the prisoner!" he cried, addressing the men selected by Captain Playfair as the ones to be sacrificed in the dash into the town of Hummingbird. "All the rest of you skip out o' hyer, at once."

In giving the orders he disguised his voice and pulled his hat over his eyes so that the prisoner might not get a good view of his features.

"You two," still speaking to Denver Jake and Pawnee Bob, "hold this chap hyer until I tell you to bring 'im into the camp. Y'u understand?"

The members of the band, who had been amazed at first, began now to comprehend the reason for the commands. The prisoner was one whom it would be dangerous to be recognized by, and one who, for some equally good cause, the chief had determined to save.

They hastened away as quickly as might be, slouching their hats over their faces in the vain hope that the prisoner might be thereby made to forget what manner of men they were.

Bozeman Jack also disappeared; leaving Lariat Bill with the two guards. But he did not remain away long. In a minute or two he was back, a black mask completely hiding his features, and with a more disguising twist in his tones than before.

The hostler, who had up to this time been much puzzled, began now to understand the nature of the maneuver he was witnessing. And it occurred to him that it would be a wise thing for him to scrutinize as closely as possible the form and faces of his guards, as they might soon be metamorphosed in the same way.

And he recognized the fact, too, now that recollection came too late to be of much benefit, that he could scarcely recall the features of a single member of the band.

This may seem surprising, at first glance, but a moment's thought will readily reveal the cause. His chase and capture had been a time of most intense excitement; he had been at once bound and hurried in the direction of the camp, and the mental strain and distress of it all had made him almost oblivious of such small matters as the peculiarity of form and dress and features of his captors. And to this must be added the fact that the shadows there in the draw and in the pass leading toward the robbers' den made vision at best rather hazy and indistinct.

"I think I'll have to have you shot!" Bozeman

declared, coming close up to Lariat Bill, but without any intention of ordering anything of the kind.

In fact, such a thing was the very last act Bozeman would have done, for he knew that the hostler had on one occasion been highly spoken of by Captain Playfair as a man who could be relied on to aid the band, should this aid ever be made necessary.

Bozeman did not know that Lariat Bill had but recently transferred his allegiance. If he had known that, it is possible the hostler's life would not have been worth a moment's purchase. What the chief wished was to test the man's courage; learn if possible what had drawn him there, and probe his motives and thoughts. As he was the hostler of the man whom the captain claimed to be one of their truest friends, it would never do to have him shot.

"You're the boss o' the shanty!" Lariat replied, endeavoring to retain his coolness and presence of mind. "I wouldn't be the pleasantest thing in the world for me, though I've not a bit of doubt it would tickle some o' yer men half to death, 'specially them that I whacked so all-firedly over the head!"

A half-dozen of those who had hurried away to don their masks, having by this time returned, Bozeman ordered them to take charge of the prisoner, and so relieved Denver Jake and Pawnee Bob.

"What air ye doin' in this section?" was the chief's next question, as he moved with the prisoner and the new escort toward the camp. "Not a-huntin' mountain goats, now?"

"It's jist what I werel!" Lariat declared, grasping at the suggestion.

"Then, why did ye run so?"

"Run! who wouldn't run, wi' a lot o' fellers chasin' a chap with guns, an' a-yellin' like all possessed? 'Twould make anybody run what wasn't a plaguey eejut! I 'low you'd 'a' run, yerself."

"An' from these hyer ropes," glancing down at his bonds, "seems to me 'twouldn't 'a' been a bad thing if I'd 'a' run a little bit faster."

"I think I know you," Bozeman said, taking a new tack. "You're a-workin' fer a man in Cuckoo named Pendergast. Ain't it so?"

"It air; an' a nice man he is, too!"

"And does he know you're out hyer? Did he send ye?"

"Was a-huntin' sheep, as I tole ye, an' come o' myself. I've got a lot o' bosses to 'tend to to-night, too; so if ye'll jist ontie me an' lemme go, I'll be everlastin'ly obleeged."

But Bozeman Jack had no notion of doing anything so foolish. He proposed to hold his prisoner until he could communicate with Captain Playfair, which would probably be in a day or two, and then obey his instructions in the matter.

With this end in view, and revolving in his mind the many enigmas lately presented, he hurried the prisoner on into the camp.

Here Lariat Bill was more securely bound than he had even been before, and placed in charge of a sentinel.

The hours intervening between the time of his capture and the coming of night were, to the hostler, hours filled with anxiety. He knew that the messenger whom he had followed from Pendergast's residence had led him to this place, for he had seen the man enter the rocky avenue and also emerge therefrom; and he knew now, likewise, that the place was the haunt of a band of outlaws.

The Hummer from Hummingbird had told him some strange things concerning his employer, and had hinted at others more dreadful, and here was proof confirmatory of the very worst.

What disposition would be made of him, also worried him not a little. He had shot, and perhaps mortally wounded, one of the band. Would his own life pay the penalty should the outlaw die?

He had looked keenly at the bonds placed on him, and as darkness came on he began as keenly to study the guard. The latter was disguised with the hideous, all-concealing black mask, but the mask could not hide everything. It could not hide the gait and attitude, and the manner in which the man set about the performance of his sentry-duty.

As the hours passed, and the members of the band retired, one by one, hope struggled strongly in the heart of the hostler. He had become known to the people of Cuckoo as the rope king, and the name had not been gained without ample reason. How he could handle the lasso has been dilated on, but no mention has been made of his other feats with the rope.

At length, all having been quiet for many hours, the head of the man left to watch the prisoner sunk lower and lower on his breast, and in Lariat's mind there was no doubt the fellow was asleep.

Lariat long before had feigned slumber, and so successfully that the guard had been completely deceived.

When quite sure the man was sleeping, Lariat rolled over on his side, and quietly began to tug at the ropes binding his wrists.

On many occasions he had given exhibitions of his peculiar skill in undoing knots the most difficult, and had demonstrated the utter inability

of any man to so tie him that he could not free himself. This was a thing well known in Cuckoo, but the knowledge of it had never come to Bozeman or any member of this band.

Within two minutes the ropes dropped from about his wrists, the knots still intact, showing that the rope king had slipped out of his bonds without untying them.

Then he twisted into a position to get at his feet; and in a much less time than would be believed by one who has never seen such feats performed, was free.

Lying still for a moment, to make sure he had not been heard, he lifted himself to a sitting posture, and looked around.

There was nothing to cause him the least uneasiness. Everywhere could be heard the deep breathing of the tired and sleeping men.

"If I on'y had a gun, er a knife!" he thought. But these weapons could not be obtained without involving too much risk.

From a sitting posture he arose to his feet; and, passing to the rearward of the slumbering guard, moved silently in the direction of the outlet.

He knew that a sentinel was also posted there, having heard the chief give instructions to that effect. Should that sentinel not be sleeping, a thing not at all to be counted on, a fight might follow.

The sentinel was awake, pacing a beat across the entrance, and as vigilant as possible considering the drowsiness that weighed down his eyes, and the lateness of the hour.

For fully fifteen minutes Lariat lay in the shadow, studying for some means whereby he might pass this man without discovery.

At last he came to the conclusion that it would be an impossible feat, so narrow was the roadway.

If he had been armed he would not have hesitated for an instant. As it was, he only stopped to take a careful survey of the bearings of the route and the position of the bowlders. Then he crept cautiously forward until so near that another movement must reveal his presence.

Having gained this coign of vantage, he gave a sudden and ear-piercing scream, and with the celerity and litheness of a mountain lion, leaped at the guard.

The latter, surprised and astonished half out of his wits, threw up his gun and fired. But the shot was wild; and before he could recover and make up his mind as to the nature of the attack, Lariat Bill leaped past him, through the opening, and bounded away in the gloom.

CHAPTER XV.

CAME FOR WOOL AND GOT SHORN.

THE escape of the hostler gave Bozeman Jack much uneasiness; and, in consequence, he abandoned his rocky retreat, the following day, and sought out a new place of refuge.

This required a great deal of work, for all their camp equipage had to be borne on the backs of men across some very rugged country.

Mike Hanshaw, whom Lariat had wounded in the fight, was much better and improving rapidly, but his condition was still such that they were forced to bear him on a stretcher.

This removal consumed time; hence delayed the attack on the Hummingbird bank.

The outlaw chief had fumed and fretted over the orders received from Captain Playfair; but had, nevertheless, gone on with preparations to carry them into effect.

On the second day after the capture of Lariat Bill, all was in readiness for the descent on the town. A number of horses, which were kept in a secluded valley, had been brought into the new resort; and the men, mounted and masked, sat awaiting their chief's commands.

When the hour of noon came they were in the timber-fringed hills which flanked the town on the west.

"We don't want to make the dash till the business men and clerks have had time to go to their dinners," announced Bozeman, glancing from his watch to the sun and back again.

Five minutes later came the command:

"Forward! and every man-jack o' you must jist everlastin'ly bu'st his lungs a-yellin', when I give the word. Don't shoot anybody, unless they crowd ye; then, give it to 'em hot. Now keep close together an' foller me."

There was a suppressed cheer of enthusiasm as their leader drew a revolver and led the way, urging his horse into a gallop as the town was neared.

To all appearances the time was rightly chosen. The town was so peaceful and quiet that it seemed deserted. Not a person was to be seen anywhere.

"They're a-fillin' theirselves up with good chuck!" one of the men commented, pleased at the thought of an easy victory. "When a feller sets down before good victuals he can't giner'ly see anything but the things in front of him, ner hear anything but the sizzlin' of the coffee-pot. I say, pards, we're in luck!"

Bozeman Jack, in consideration of the unusual calm that prevailed, withheld the orders for his men to cheer, until the neighborhood of the bank was gained. Then he began to fire his revolver into the air, giving at the same time a

series of whoops that would have done credit to a wild Comanche. His men imitated the example thus set; and the result was terrifying and deafening.

The outlaws leaped from their well-trained steeds in front of the bank, the animals having been taught to stand quietly wherever left when their bridle-reins were down.

With yells that exceeded in noise any previously given, they dashed into the building. They felt sure the one employee there would be half frightened out of his wits and fly at sight of them.

They were doomed to a most bitter disappointment. Instead of the one scared man whom they expected to see, they found themselves confronted by more than a dozen, all well-armed and waiting!

"Back with ye, every one!" roared Bozeman Jack, seeing that he had been led into a trap. "Back with ye! Down with ye! Back! Back!"

He fairly screamed out the command, bodily forcing his men from the door; and they, understanding the nature of the situation, dropped flat on their faces, as the rifles of the men within the bank rung out and the bullets whistled above them.

One shot plowed through Bozeman's left arm, partially disabling it and making an ugly flesh wound. But he paid no heed to this for he had saved his life by hurling himself prostrate on the crouching bodies of his men.

Before the bank men could fire again, the outlaws had rolled from the doorway, scrambled wildly to their feet, and made a mad dash for their horses.

Some of these were snorting with terror over the unexpected firing and half inclined to break away as the road-agents reached them.

The defenders of the bank poured out of the building, working the levers of their Winchesters; but Bozeman's men were well seated and bending forward to avoid the anticipated shots before the bank men gained the street.

But new dangers threatened the discomfited outlaws. From every street and alley swarmed bands of men until it seemed that the way of escape must surely be blocked.

Bozeman uttered a bitter curse as his eyes sought for some avenue of retreat. How had the people of Hummingbird received warning? Who was the traitor?

He glanced quickly over the men crowding about him and anxiously awaiting his instructions.

To his surprise he observed that the number had been reduced by two.

"There's been treachery hyer!" he hissed, under his breath. "Two o' my men's gone back on me. Who air they? I'll kill 'em, if I die fer it!"

In the wild charge with which he had entered the town he had failed to notice that two of his command had dropped behind at the first side-street; had crowded their horses behind a building to escape observation; and when their comrades were well out of sight had ridden away in another direction.

These men were Denver Jake and Pawnee Bob, the ones doomed by Captain Playfair's letter to death in this attack on the bank.

"Yes, I'll kill 'em with my own hand!" Bozeman muttered, chafing under this discovery of perfidy.

But he was not given time to brood over this. The people of the town were closing in on him and his followers; and, if they were to escape, instant action must be taken.

He was about to order a charge on the weakest portion of the advancing line, hoping by swift riding and desperate fighting to break through without great loss.

Before the command was given, however, his plan changed.

Coming from the opposite direction, mounted and leading a band of citizens who were on foot, were the traitors.

He recognized them instantly; and with a hoarse bellow of rage, set his horse in motion and spurred toward them, his men crowding close after without any verbal order.

The sight of Pawnee Bob and Denver Jake leading this body of his enemies seemed to transform the outlaw chief into a veritable demon. His dark, fierce face took on a deadly look of hate, and his black eyes blazed with something akin to insanity. His lips moved, though no words issued from them, while bits of foam flecked his stubby beard. His wounded arm was forgotten, and though the blood was flowing freely from it, staining his clothing a deep crimson, he knew it not.

When within range, he hastily emptied his revolvers of their contents; but so wrought up was he that his aim was execrable and the shots failed of execution.

The fire was returned, and two of his men were hit, though not so seriously but that they could cling to their horses.

Then, like the rush of two opposing tornadoes, the contending forces came together, and the fight became hand to hand and general.

Bozeman Jack had fixed his gaze on Pawnee Bob, and rode at him with the fury of desperation. The latter seemed nothing loth to meet

his late chief in single combat. The weapons of both were empty.

With a revolver clubbed, Bozeman forced his steed against Pawnee Bob's, and aimed a furious blow at the rider's head. It was parried, and the butt of Pawnee's revolver caught the chief on the shoulder, and almost hurled him from the saddle.

The blow had fallen on the shoulder of the injured arm, which now dangled quite helpless.

Again Bozeman charged, striking as furiously as before. This time the aim was truer. The revolver butt descended squarely on Pawnee's head, and he rolled to the ground, senseless.

With a hoarse cry of triumph, the outlaw leader turned to look for Denver Jake, when he was made aware of the extreme peril of his position. Four of his men had been dragged from their horses and were prisoners; the others had been worsted and forced to fly; while the victorious citizens were crowding upon him.

There was nothing left to him but flight or capture; and choosing the first, he struck down the man who had grasped the bridle-rein, plunged the spurs cruelly into the flanks of his horse, and was away like a shot.

A half-dozen bounds of the animal sufficed to place a building between him and his foes; and thus screened from their fire he rode fiercely away in the trail of his fleeing men.

CHAPTER XVI.

TELLTALE PENMANSHIP.

"It hardly requires an expert to detect the resemblance."

Old Adamant and Hike Hartsook were in the room of the former, in the town of Cuckoo. It was not the room occupied by Adamant on first coming to the place. That had been too far removed from the Cuckoo's Nest to meet his needs, and was open to the additional objection of being in a state of bad repair.

The men were bending over some sheets of writing spread out on a table in the center of the apartment.

The first was the identical letter which Bozeman Jack had received from Captain Playfair's messenger, and which had been the cause of the disastrous raid on the bank at Hummingbird. The other was a letter bearing the signature of Lemuel Pendergast.

"The handwriting is identical," Adamant continued. "Of course, in this Playfair letter the penmanship is much disguised. The letters have a more crabbed, cramped look, and stand almost erect; while in the other the slant is quite marked. But I could testify on oath they are the same."

The Hummer from Hummingbird was not an adept in such matters; but, when Adamant went carefully over the points of resemblance, even he could see that the penmanship was the same.

"Which goes to prove," and the Man of Rock smiled grimly, "that Judge Lemuel Pendergast and Captain Playfair, the head and shoulders of the road-agent organization, are one and the same. I've been convinced of it for some time; but it's pleasant, and may prove very convenient, to be in possession of such conclusive proofs."

He took the letters in his hands and dropped into a chair, glancing at them from time to time as he talked.

"It was a lucky thing for us, and a very unlucky thing for Captain Playfair, Bozeman Jack, and their gang, that our new friend Lariat Bill took it into his head to follow Pendergast's messenger."

"The story told by Denver Jake and Pawnee Bob puts us now in possession of the facts. From their report it appears that Bozeman Jack was reading this identical letter, or at least they presume it to have been the same, when Lariat Bill was discovered and pursued."

"In the excitement of the moment Bozeman probably dropped the letter and for the time being forgot all about it. When he came to look for it, it was not to be seen. It had been blown by the wind into the adjacent bushes; where it was found early the next morning by Pawnee Bob."

"Naturally, they were not pleased with its contents, particularly that portion referring in such kindly terms to them."

"But they were wise enough to conceal the fact of the discovery from their chief. And in the darkness of the following night Denver Jake made his way on foot over the rough trails to Hummingbird, conferred with the bank officials, and assisted in laying the trap for his perfidious commander. He got back before daylight, and without Bozeman being the wiser; and a terrible tramp he must have had of it."

"The letter, given by him to the bank men, was at once forwarded to me; and here it is."

Hartsook looked at it more earnestly than ever, the history of it having added much to its interest.

"And the other?" he questioned, indicating the second letter.

"Oh, this?" holding up the one signed with Pendergast's own name. "Lariat Bill obtained it for me from the judge's desk. Almost a case of petit larceny, eh? It looks that way; and I

never like to do anything of the kind. But there's an old and very true saying, to the effect that you must fight the devil with his own weapons. In dealing with a rascal one sometimes is compelled to use questionable methods. This is a case in point."

"I told Lariat that I wanted a sample of the judge's penmanship; that I must have it; and he brought me this. Lariat Bill is a warmer friend and a truer ally of ours since that little adventure that so nearly cost him his life. He is beginning to understand what kind of man his employer really is."

"Can't have a very high opinion of him, then!" and the Hummer shook his blonde locks sagely.

"I dare say not. And he will have a still poorer one before we get through, or I miss my guess."

The Man of Rock folded the letters carefully and placed them in an inner pocket of his coat.

"I shall take care to keep those in my hands until the time comes to make use of them!" with a click of the firm-set jaws. "And, now, what about the election? Any news worth repeating?"

"Things are livening up," the Hummer declared. "Getting almost as hot as a lime-kiln! The judge and his friends are leaving no stone unturned to accomplish their ends, which is to secure the election of their entire ticket. That letter tells something of their plans. If they can run all the rascals of the country into the town of Cuckoo they'll have us by the hip; for of course every scamp of that kind will just as naturally vote for the judge's outfit as water will run down hill. It would be impossible to make them do anything else."

"Unless," and he looked at Adamant in a way to suggest that he knew the plan to be mentioned would not meet approval, "we should proceed to spend money like water and buy them. Such fellows, you know, are always for sale!"

"Which we wouldn't do, if we had millions at our command!" with a straightening of the high, bold forehead.

"I knew that, of course. We'll have to make the fight on other lines. We'll rout 'em, though, trust me for that. I've been working like a veritable Turk, and so has Lariat. I just wish I knew what the judge thinks of his hostler by this time."

"That the sooner he gets rid of him the better; and that he will give him his dismissal in the not distant future!" was the prophetic answer.

"About Bozeman Jack?" Hartsook queried. "What are your plans?"

"I hardly think he will attempt to bring himself and his men into Cuckoo, now, for the purpose of adding to the voting population. It would be too tremendously risky, since the failure of the attack on the Hummingbird bank. All that scheme will surely have to be abandoned by Playfair; for it will be impossible for Bozeman to carry out the remainder of his chief's instructions."

"Hence, the thieves and plug-uglies of Hummingbird will remain in Hummingbird; Bozeman Jack and the remnant of his band will stay in the mountains; and Judge Pendergast—our very dear friend, Pendergast—will lose many votes."

"All of which makes me glad!"

"But if they should come here," and the deep, steel-gray eyes looked straight into those of Hartsook, while the tall, stooped form was drawn almost erect, "you, my gentle Hummer, will have to make things hum."

"In other words, you must see to it that if they come here they do not leave again, except as prisoners. You understand?"

"I think I do!" and Hartsook took up the hat with the cuckoo's wings, preparatory to departing. "Thanks for the order. I will see that it is implicitly carried out."

CHAPTER XVII.

LARIAT BILL AS A SPY.

THE same night, but much nearer morning, Judge Pendergast, masked and disguised as Captain Playfair, had a meeting with Bozeman Jack on the edge of the town.

Bozeman had come to make a personal statement concerning the causes of the miscarriage of Playfair's command, and was in no very amiable frame of mind.

"'Tweren't no fault o' mine!" he growled, in response to a rebuke from Playfair.

"It must have been," Playfair asserted. "My instructions were sent sealed; you received them sealed; and, excepting for your carelessness, the matter could never have been made known. You left the letter lying somewhere, and those two men got to read it. How often have I told you to instantly burn every communication received from me?"

"Blast your old letters, anyway! 'Tain't no way to send orders, nohow. Why didn't ye come yerself? 'Tain't sich a 'tarnal long ways. You have me runnin' to town hyer, every week er two."

"Come! Come!" exclaimed Playfair, his tones showing irritation. "Don't talk so loud, or we'll be heard."

"No, I won't come; ner I won't go, neither, hereafter, unless I choose. I don't yit see the sense o' mixin' in this political rumpus. I've half an idee this hyer Judge Pendergast is a blame political quack, anyhow. Would be let me loose, now, d'ye reckon, if I wuz ketched an' hauled up afore 'im? Not much he wouldn't, 'less I stuck a bag o' gold into his fist."

"An' then, to order the killin' o' two o' my men jist to make a few votes fer this feller. I tell ye it makes me hot; hot as I wuz when I found out that Jake an' Bob had turned ag'in' me an' give the hull snap away."

Pendergast's eyes blazed behind his mask, though the darkness concealed the fact from his subordinate.

"Enough of that!" he cried, angrily. "You forget yourself, Bozeman. I am your chief, you must recollect, and my orders are your law; the only law you and your band can have. I followed my best judgment in outlining the plan; and if you hadn't played the fool, it would have worked just as I intended."

Bozeman Jack's dark face became fiercer and darker, and his stubby beard twitched with the convulsive movements of his lips.

"Have a care, Captain Playfair!" he gritted. "I ain't in any humor fer sass jist now. Half my men are wounded er captured, an' I've got a bullet through my arm that don't feel any too good."

"Don't be so brash, then," Playfair retorted.

"Have a care, Captain Playfair!" and the words were full of deadly menace. "Another break er two like you've been makin', an' I'll pull that mask off yer face an' see who it is that's orderin' me around like I wuz a dog. What d'ye hide behind that fer, anyway? Why don't ye come out like a man? I know all my men, and they know me; but nary a one o' us has ever seen yer face or knows who you really air. I'm tired of it."

Playfair had taken a quick step backward, his hand falling to the revolver at his waist.

"Touch it if you dare, and I'll drop you in your tracks!"

Bozeman raised his hand; but it fell again as the weapon came up on a level with his breast.

"Have a little sense!" Playfair insisted. "What's the use of you and me quarreling? Neither of us can get along without the other. As for the mask, I wear it because—I want to!"

"There is an old saying, and it's a lie, that there is honor among thieves. Yes, it's a lie; and you know it as well as I do!"

The threatening revolver had come down.

"Knowing which, my dear Bozeman," and the attempt at a cheery laugh resulted only in a sinister chuckle, "I prefer to conceal my identity. If you had been as wise, you would have concealed yours. So far as you and the band are concerned, I am Captain Playfair; nothing less, nothing more."

Bozeman's resentment had cooled somewhat, whether because of the words or the threatening revolver did not appear.

"I s'pose it's all right," he confessed, taking a seat on a fallen log, and nursing the injured arm which he carried in a sling. "But ye mustn't rub me the wrong way, captain, now I tell ye. And when things goes wrong, as they will 'casion'ly, ye mustn't go fer to puttin' all the blame onto me. It jist nacherly riles me an' I can't help it."

"It's all right," said Playfair with an effort at good-humor. "But if you ever touch that mask, I'll not be responsible for the consequences. You may as well understand that first as last."

Bozeman nursed the bandaged arm and made no reply.

"It is my place to do the planning, and yours to carry out instructions. Where would your band be but for my planning? Who is it keeps track of everything? Why, every one of you would have been captured and strung up by the necks long ago but for me!"

"You've never taken an ounce of dust on these trails but what I've sent you word of its coming, with full particulars as to the men you would have to encounter, and the amount of the swag. And I've kept you posted concerning the coming and going of the officers and detectives who have been hunting you, telling you when and where to expect them, and how to keep out of their clutches."

"And yet, here you are questioning my plans and good intentions. Just think it over, Bozeman, and I know you will agree with me. We are necessary to each other; I to do the planning and you to do the fighting. We can't afford to quarrel."

Bozeman felt that his chief spoke truly; as for himself, he was a fighter only, not a schemer. He could carry out plans much better than he could form them.

"I guess I'm a blame fool," he averred, rising and extending his hand. "Shake, an' we'll try to fergit all about it. Now, I'm goin'. Good-night."

He turned and disappeared in the shadows. When the sounds of his footsteps could be no longer heard, Captain Playfair made his way to a sequestered spot, from which, in the course of a half-hour, he returned as Judge Pendergast.

He went directly to his room above the

Cuckoo's Nest, and there met Silk-Hat Sid, Cockney Joe and Sam Turnbull, the gamblers with whom he so often conferred. But he said nothing of his meeting with Bozeman Jack.

Instead, the talk turned immediately on the coming election, and on the doings of Old Adamant and Hartsook.

"If I just had the head of a major-general!" and Silk-Hat Sid twisted the cord of his eyeglasses into a becoming knot. "My! if I only had! I'd plan such a campaign against these fellows as should make me famous."

"Talk's a good thing," said Turnbull, scornfully, "but for my part I'd prefer the rustle and get-there of this Hummer from Hummingbird. If we had a few men like him on our side, we'd be a good deal better off when election day rolls around."

"Them's my sentiments!" and Cockney Joe struck the table a resounding blow, to give emphasis to his assertion. "Hi say there hisn't hanything like work, hif a man wants to win bin a fight like this."

"Or money!" sneered Sid, setting the glasses astride his dudish nose, and staring superciliously at his critics. "The love of money is—the hand that rocks the world. Gentlemen, there isn't anything like it. Enough of it, rightly applied, will make a man murder his mother-in-law."

"You're right there," agreed Pendergast. "If we only had the money! Ay, there's the rub. I've had a conference with Captain Playfair, and he tells me that for the present he can do nothing. The failure of his men at Hummingbird knocked out his calculations. But he has other plans, he assured me, and will be able to furnish us something in the near future."

Silk-Hat Sid thrust his tongue in his cheek and winked at Turnbull.

"Not the head of a major-general, but a very good head, eh?"

"The trouble," Pendergast went on, "is that I am much afraid we can't get enough money to do us any good. It's going to take a small fortune, and none of us are very well supplied in that line. Gamblers never are, you know. We've too many little extravagances."

"I'll cut cigars off my bill of necessities—and, let me see—I'll swear off on losing any more at faro. It's a beastly game, anyhow!"

Sid's meaningless chatter brought a frown to Pendergast's face.

"Stow all that!" he cried. "This is a serious matter. You'll all realize it if we're beaten. I've been doing some thinking."

"Good!" cried the irrepressible dude. "Now that you've found out how, tell the rest of us!"

"I've been thinking," Pendergast continued, paying no heed to the interruption, "that if the money fails us we can resort to bold measures. It's some time yet till the day of election, and a good many things may occur in our favor. But if, at the last moment, we see we are to be defeated, we can have Old Adamant carried off—spirited away!"

"Or," and he looked slowly around the small circle of faces, "I have heard of men being killed!"

The silence that followed this was painful. These men were not so desperate as was Pendergast. Possibly they did not have as much at stake.

He saw the hesitancy in their countenances.

"I say, I've heard of such things! And the town of Cuckoo may hear of such things; and you, my sweet innocents, may have to know more about it than you would care to confess."

"Remember, I'm not making any threats, neither am I giving advice. I am simply judging a cruel future by a cruel past—and doing a little prophesying!"

It had been on his mind to say this for some time, for he began to feel that desperate measures would have to be resorted to before long; and when the hour came for putting them into execution, he wanted the assistance and co-operation of these men.

Having thus thrown out a thought for them to occupy their minds with, he drew the pack of cards from the desk, and began to shuffle them for a game.

Nor did he mention the subject again that night, leaving the room, in company with the three, shortly before sunrise.

The apartment was no sooner vacated than there was a stir beneath a lounge in one corner, and Lariat Bill poked out his head to take a look about before venturing from his place of concealment.

He had come up there earlier in the evening with Pendergast, and fallen asleep on the lounge, or pretended to do so. Pendergast had left him there, and on returning found him, as supposed, gone, and thought no more about it.

But the hostler had crept beneath the lounge, where he had been ever since, his plan being to feign intoxication should he chance to be discovered.

There was a bottle of liquor on the table; and, having extricated himself from his perilous and uncomfortable position, he went over and held it up to his nose.

"It smells like it's good!" eying it wistfully. "But I won't! No, I won't tech it! I promised

Betty I wouldn't, and banded if I don't stick to my promise, if it takes the hide off."

"An' so they're a-goin' to lay out Old Adamant! I wouldn't 'a' missed hearin' that for a race-hoss. The Hummer's got to know *that* 'fore I sleep!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

BEAUTY ANGERED.

"HELL bath no fury," a woman scorned!" The world's greatest dramatist could not have had Mollie Stubbs in his mind's eye when he penned the above declaration; yet it fairly well describes her mental state. The Hummer from Hummingbird had devoured her cookies and confessed a fondness for them, but he had confessed no fondness for her. He had praised the beauty of her kitchen, but had had no word of praise for the beauty of the kitchen's presiding genius. He had acknowledged that the cooking utensils were bright, but had said nothing concerning the brightness of their manipulator.

Hence, there grew in her soul a feeling of deep resentment, a feeling that intensified as the days went by without bringing the Hummer to her feet in the attitude of an adorer.

He had been a frequent visitor to the house, of late, and she had planned many little surprises for him, and with delicate viands had tempted him into lingering. In her anxiety she had almost forgotten the qualities so prized in woman, and with broad hints had time and again invited him to call on her.

Her efforts had been all in vain. Suave and oily as was the Hummer, he could not quite conceal his intense dislike for her; and there was always a ready excuse on the end of his tongue for tearing himself away.

"I jist hate 'im!" she sputtered, after one of these unsatisfactory interviews. "He's that stuck up he can't even be perlite. An' he thinks he's so smart! The idee of a man goin' round with feathers on his hat, anyway. It's too much like a woman to suit me."

Perhaps Mollie had forgotten that scarcely a week before she had commented favorably on this very peculiarity. But that was in Hartsook's presence.

She rested her hands on her hips, with arms akimbo, and looked after him as he walked up the street. There was an unusual light in her washed-out eyes, her freckled face showed anger, and there was a disdainful curve in her turn-up nose.

"I reckon he thinks I'm no better than the dirt under his feet. Mebbe he thinks I'm a fool, too; but I'll show 'im a thing or two. An' as fer looks, I don't think that yaller hair o' his is anything extry."

She drew down a roll of her own sandy hair for inspection.

"He thinks I'm red-headed, I'll 'low, but I'd rather my hair'd be the color it is than to shine up like a new straw-stack."

She went back to her work, her thoughts following Hartsook instead of being fixed on the tasks she was engaged in. And they were far from agreeable thoughts, to judge by her looks and mutterings.

When Judge Pendergast came home for his dinner, she hovered unusually near him, awaiting an opportunity to speak. Pendergast generally paid her little attention, and was therefore unconscious of her very manifest desire.

It was only after Edith had retired that she gained the opportunity sought.

"I should like to see you in the library a minute, jedge."

Pendergast looked sharply at her, caught by the suppressed tremor of her tones.

"Something important, eh? Very well; follow me."

He led the way through the hall, she close at his heels.

When they were within the library he shut the door and pointed to a chair.

"It's about your daughter, and—and—Mr. Hummer," with a deprecatory cough.

The judge seated himself opposite, wondering what was coming.

Had Edith and Hartsook fallen in love with each other? He had not known of the frequent visits the Hummer had made to the house, though aware that he had been there on two or three occasions. The knowledge of these had annoyed him so much that he had thought seriously of commanding him to remain away thereafter. Had he not been somewhat afraid of Edith, he would have done so.

Miss Stubbs fidgeted under his gaze and twisted at her apron, not knowing how to go on.

"You've been good to me, jedge, an' give me a home byer. I ought to feel grateful, and I am."

Pendergast wondered if she was preparing to give him a notice of leave, and what this had to do with Edith and Hartsook.

"An' so, seein' the goin's on which I've seen an' hearin' the things which I've heard, I thought it my duty to tell ye. Mebbe I'm a-sayin' it which I oughtn't, but Mr. Hummer has been callin' quite reg'lar on Edith, which I think is a shame, considerin' the way she seemed to think of Mr. Raymond."

"An' they've been a-talkin' about you, jedge; I've heerd 'em."

"So?" and the judge lifted his white eyebrows, thereby indicating to her that he was much surprised.

"Yes," she asserted, encouraged by this show of interest. "An' Mr. Hummer has been sayin' the most dreadful things about you."

The judge's interest was quickened, and anxiety was shown by the uneasy way in which he shifted in his chair.

"Go on!" he said. "Tell me what you heard."

"He said you was a bad man."

"What else?"

"That you was the wu'st man in Cuckoo."

"What else?" and the judge's pallid cheeks hardened.

Miss Stubbs was unconsciously getting herself into a corner, for she had merely surmised these things, not heard them.

"He said you was a gambler."

"He needn't have taken the trouble to tell her that. I'd never pretended I wasn't."

"And—and—"

"Out with it!" Pendergast commanded, anticipating something dreadful.

Miss Stubbs fairly tied her apron into a knot.

"I don't jist remember all he *did* say."

The judge saw that she had been lying.

"Oh, you don't remember?"

"No," said Miss Stubbs. "But, 'twas awful!"

The judge was doing some rapid thinking. He saw that Miss Stubbs had some secret reason for hating Hartsook, and that she did not have any kindly feeling for Edith, and it occurred to him that he might make use of this.

"I am glad you have told me these things," he assured. "You are a true friend to me, Mollie, and I'll see that you don't lose anything by it. This Hummer hates me, for some reason, and will do all he can to injure me."

"It pains me, too, beyond measure to know that Edith will listen to his lies. If she was the dutiful daughter she ought to be she wouldn't do it."

"That's jist what I think!" Miss Stubbs ejaculated.

"What you have told me shows me, Mollie, that you are a woman of some discretion. You can help me, if you will; and I will pay you well for it."

Mollie looked her gratitude. She had not come expecting money. Revenge was her object. But money combined with revenge would be doubly sweet.

"You have already been doing some spying, as you confess. I am now paying you five dollars a week. If you will keep a close watch over the movements of my daughter, and manage to hear all that is said between her and the Hummer, and report to me promptly, I will pay you ten dollars a week."

Mollie's light eyes snapped with unusual fire.

"I'll do it!" she agreed.

"You'll have to be very careful," the judge cautioned. "If you are caught, it will ruin everything."

"I'll be a mouse."

"And if Old Adamant should call, or any one you think sent by him or the Hummer, you must hear what they say."

Mollie nodded vigorously to show that she comprehended.

"And Lariat Bill," the judge continued. "I don't like the way he's been doing lately. He's been working against me with the voters."

"I'll watch 'im!" Mollie declared.

"From what you have said, though, I think I have most to fear from Hartsook. Perhaps you can worm some secrets out of him. Not by eavesdropping. He's sweet on you, I've been told."

Miss Stubbs colored painfully under her freckles.

"You've been feeding him cookies and bonbons, and no doubt he has been trying to make love to you."

Knowing that the Hummer had done nothing of the kind, yet wishing that he had, Mollie burned with inward rage.

"A little," she confessed, with proper demureness.

"So I thought. In that case, you ought to be able to get some valuable secrets from him."

"And don't forget the pay!"

The judge took up his hat; then stopped as if about to say something else.

But he did not; and speedily made his exit from the house, leaving Miss Stubbs a prey to a storm of unenviable emotions.

"The jedge is a gentleman!" she declared, as she made her way to the kitchen. "And I'll stand by 'im through thick an' thin."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HUMMER HUMS.

JUDGE PENDERGAST had much to cause him annoyance and uneasiness. Old Adamant was making astonishing headway in the good graces of the voters. The Hummingbird Hummer was proving himself a host.

Never did a man seem to work with such pertinacious energy, and with such success as

Hartsook. He knew every man in the camp, and was hail-fellow-well-met with great numbers. There was a species of subtle magnetism in the man's composition that caused him to "take" with the class forming the bulk of Cuckoo's population.

Hence, he was the most dangerous foe imaginable.

Of course, there were the judge's especial friends and champions, over whom he had no influence, and who hated him quite as cordially as did the judge, himself. But Hartsook made no attempt to win the good opinion of these, knowing it would be impossible.

The candidacy of Judge Pendergast was not the only one endangered by Adamant's course. There were other offices to be filled; some of them fully as necessary to the tough element as was that of police judge; and over these the fight raged with equal fierceness. The marshal of the camp, the treasurer of the county, the register of deeds, the commissioners of public works, all were friends and allies of Pendergast.

As has been hinted there was more at stake than the public was aware of. Even many who considered themselves well posted were not admitted to the inner circle of the judge's confidence and friendship. And, therefore, while advocating the re-election of the Pendergast ticket, were not aware that in so doing they were assisting a vast and comprehensive scheme to rob the community and put money in the pockets of their favorite candidates.

The plan mapped out by the judge was daring, if not original. The offices were to be refilled by the men who now held them. That gained, a series of bonds for imaginary improvements was to be issued secretly, sold by shrewd and unscrupulous agents in the Eastern markets; and the proceeds, after paying expenses were to go into the pockets of the schemers.

Before the community became aware of what had been done, the promoters of the villainy anticipated a removal to other regions, where under new disguises and new aliases, they could enjoy the wealth thus illy got.

Such things have been done, and may be done again; and Pendergast was not the man to hesitate at any measure, however desperate, that promised wealth and a life of ease.

When the people woke to a realization of how they had been duped and victimized, it was too late to wholly undo the mischief. So far as the actors were concerned, it could not be undone. And, if the bonds passed into the hands of so-called "innocent purchasers," payment of them must be made, or a tedious and uncertain litigation would result.

Although Bozeman Jack had failed in his assigned duty, the gamblers from the regions round about poured into Cuckoo in astonishing numbers, and as only a ten-days' residence was required to give them the right to vote, the judge's strength was thus greatly augmented.

By some means the judge had obtained money—though just how, his most intimate associates could not say. He was the manager of a mine owned by his daughter, and was generally supposed to have the use of its proceeds. But if the money came from the profits of the mine, the profits, every one fancied, must have been unusually large of late.

It was probably this money that was attracting the tough element of the region. Either that or promises of large "boodle" should the judge and his friends succeed.

This influx of thieves and thugs greatly distressed Hartsook and his friend Adamant. They feared they would be unable to cope with it effectually.

But the untiring Hummer did not, on that account, lose heart. He worked, if possible, with more vim and energy than ever. His time was filled with toil throughout almost the whole of each twenty-four hours.

Pendergast had drawn the gambling trio, Cockney Joe, Turnbull and Silk-Hat Sid, completely into his service, with promises of big rewards; but the indefatigable Hummer from Hummingbird was more than a match for the three. And daily he made inroads on the judge's strength.

So evident did this at last become that Pendergast grew desperate. Not that he was ever a man to stop at trifles! But he became wrought up by this opposition to a most unusual pitch.

"Something must be done!" he reflected. "I'll have to take measures for stopping the work of the Hummer. If I don't, we're all ruined. And to be balked, now! I'll not endure it!"

A whole night he gave to the consideration of various measures for accomplishing his purposes. Then he took his way to a cabin in the outskirts of the town.

He approached it in a very roundabout way, taking good care to see that his movements were not observed. The position of the cabin aided him. It was located amid the bluffs that came close up to the camp on that side, and the view was much obstructed by trees. Unless his footsteps were dogged there was little chance that any one seeing him leave the business portion of the town could guess his destination.

He knocked at the cabin door. There was no response to this; but a furious rat-a-tat with the end of a stout stick brought a grumbling:

"Hello! Who's there?"

"Come and see, and don't make so much noise about it!" Pendergast replied.

The sound of bare feet striking the board floor was heard, then a shuffling movement, after which the door was cautiously pushed open.

A head appeared in human semblance, but the hair was so matted and untended, and the eyes so bleared and the face so swollen, that one might have been pardoned for thinking it the head of a beast.

After the head came the shoulders and form of a man.

"W'ot d'ye want?" inquired the gruff voice belonging to the head.

"I want to come in," said the judge, drawing back as if he feared contact with the repulsive creature. "I want to have a talk with you."

The eyes glanced apprehensively about, the door was drawn wider open, and the judge was allowed to enter.

The belongings of the room were in keeping with the man's appearance. Everywhere were evidences of dirt and brutish squalor.

Pendergast carefully brushed off the only chair before seating himself in it. Then he looked at the occupant of the house.

The latter had sunk upon the bed in a half-recumbent attitude, and was staring curiously at the intruder.

The judge knew the fellow well. He was a worthless vagabond, whose entire manhood and self-respect had been swallowed up in his love for drink; and to the citizens of Cuckoo he was known as Whisky Tim.

"You know me," said Pendergast, returning the stare with interest. "You've seen me often."

"Tell a feller somethin' w'ot he don't know," Tim growled, apparently not pleased at the intrusion.

"I wasn't sure," the judge apologized. "You looked at me so straight!"

Whisky Tim was manifestly just recovering from a debauch. He was known to be bold to recklessness, and was called "a bad man" when in his cups. Pendergast had only spoken to him a few times, and scarcely knew how to broach the subject of his visit.

"I suppose you would be willing to do a little work, and not care particularly what it is so long as you are paid for it?"

Something like interest was visible in the man's imbruted face.

"W'ot air ye drivin' at, now? Coves like you don't go fer to hire vagabones like me 'less'n they's dirty work to do."

The judge shifted his glance and fixed it on the floor.

"I presume it's best not to inquire too closely into the character of the work. I've got five hundred dollars, though, which is yours on condition."

"You know Hike Hartsook. He hasn't been here long, but he's made himself pretty busy, and every man in the camp or in the country round about knows him."

"I've hearn o' him. He's buckin' this here Ole Adamant ag'in ye fer judge."

"I see you are posted," and Pendergast affected a smile. "Well, I'll not say what's to be done; nor how you're to do it. Perhaps you can guess, though, if you try right hard. And if you guess correctly, and do the work as it ought to be done, I've got five hundred for you."

"You mean lay 'im out!" Whisky Tim blurted.

"I haven't said anything of the kind, have I?" with an eager look in his pallid face.

"You've as much as hinted it!"

"I'm not hinting anything. And the five hundred won't be yours unless you learn to keep your tongue in your teeth."

"I'm an eyster!" Whisky Jim declared, grinning horribly. "I hain't got no years ner no mouth ner no anything. I'm an eyster, that's w'ot I am."

Pendergast leaned forward with even more eagerness than before, and while he had already spoken in low tones, he now sunk his voice to a whisper.

"As I said, I sha'n't tell you *what* you are to do, Tim, but if you haven't lost all your sense, you may make a passable guess at it. Hike Hartsook is in my way. If he keeps on as he has begun he is likely to beat me for the judgeship. What is to be done, too, must be done at once, for he is making votes against me every day."

"I've hearn the Hummer ain't no baby to tackle," Tim asserted, bringing his head close to Pendergast's. "Lariat Bill tried it."

"Lariat Bill is a fool."

"An' I'm another fer listenin' to ye. But I do want money, powerful. Five hundred dollars is a big pile. I could bum fer the next five year on that."

The close proximity was too much for the judge and he drew back for a breath of purer air, though the atmosphere of the entire cabin was of the vilest.

"There's no use talking longer. If you want

the money you can have it, but you must earn it first."

He drew out his purse.

"Here is a twenty-dollar gold-piece. It will prove to you that I mean business."

Then he slipped from the cabin, and by a winding route made his way back to the Cuckoo's Nest.

CHAPTER XX.

"MUSIC IN THE AIR."

THE judge had not counted without his host in offering his bribe to Whisky Tim. He could hardly have found a tool more willing. The five hundred dollars was to the whisky-soaked reprobate an irresistible magnet.

Shortly before the coming of night, Whisky Tim sallied forth, a big navy belted to his waist, and proceeded to fill himself up on some of the vilest liquor in Cuckoo. Then, after the style of such men, he paraded the streets, talking loudly and giving an occasional whoop.

Judge Pendergast had been watching for him, and was not a little uneasy lest his tool should be run in before the work had been accomplished. To avoid such a mischance he called the marshal to one side and instructed him to let the drinker have full swing for that evening.

Hartsook came early to the Cuckoo's Nest that night, all unaware of danger. He passed Whisky Tim on the way, but, as he had never had any trouble with the fellow, gave him no thought.

He had been in the room but a short time, and was seated at a table conversing with some cronies, when Tim entered. He was even then wild with drink, but he walked up to the bar and called for another glass.

Arkansaw Tom was not a man to refuse money, nor to hesitate about selling to all comers. He frequently said that one man's cash was as good as another's. Hence, he poured out the liquor for Whisky Tim, notwithstanding the latter's condition.

When he had drained the glass Tim set it down with a crash, steadied himself against the bar for a moment, and looked over the room. His eyes fell on Hartsook.

With an effort at swagger he staggered by the table, purposely stumbling against and falling over Hartsook's extended foot.

"W'ot ye got yer mud-scows-a-stickin' out fer gen'lemen to fall over fer?" he howled, drawing himself up and aiming a blow at the Hummer.

"See here, my good friend," the Hummer remonstrated, easily evading the blow, "that was your own fault."

"You're a liar!" Whisky Tim exclaimed, striking with his knife at the Hummer's hand which was extended on the table.

His object was to pin the hand to the table, and thus place Hartsook *hors de combat*. But he was not quick enough in his movement, for the latter saw the descending knife and understood the nature of the effort in time to escape the thrust.

"You don't come anything of that kind!" and the hand which Whisky Tim had tried to pin fast, was doubled into an exceedingly hard fist, and caught the scoundrel in the face, causing him to measure his length on the floor.

And all this had been accomplished without the Hummer rising from his seat, for the knife sticking fast in the table, Whisky Tim had endeavored to disengage, and thus presented himself perilously near the man he had come to slay.

The end, however, was not to come so easily.

Whisky Tim had reached for his revolver as he went down, and drawing it began to fire at Hartsook and those gathered around the table.

The greatest excitement instantly prevailed, and there was an immediate stampede for the doors and windows, for nothing will so demoralize the average crowd as indiscriminate and wild shooting.

In the midst of the uproar some one either blew out or shot out the lights, plunging the Cuckoo's Nest into stygian darkness.

There followed howls and screams of fright and terror, and a tumult indescribable. From the doors and windows the throng poured, emptying itself into the street. Some, thoroughly panic-stricken, raced away through the gloom, as if anxious to put as great a distance as possible between their precious persons and the Babel raging behind.

But it was not long before the uproar in the saloon grew quiet, and a light pierced the darkness; at which indication that peace once more reigned, some of the boldest ventured back.

They found the chairs and tables overturned and broken, a number of lamps shattered, and everything in the direst confusion. And in the midst of it, calm as a June morning, was the Hummingbird Hummer!

He was seated at the table where he had sat before; he having restored the table to its upright position; and on the floor not far distant was Whisky Tim, bound, and gagged with the barrel of his own revolver.

Except for this there was nothing to show that anything unusual had happened, judging solely by the composure of the Hummer.

"If this fellow has any friends they'd better

take him home!" he remarked, as the crowd began to swarm in. "He's pretty drunk and is liable to hurt himself, or run up against some one who will hurt him."

Whisky Tim's eyes were rolling anxiously.

No one seemed disposed to comply with Hartsook's request, nor announce himself as a friend of the beaten man.

Arkansaw Tom, glancing over his damaged furniture, became much incensed.

"What kind of a game air you two fellers up to, anyway?" he demanded, furiously. "An' I'd like to know who's to pay for all this?"

Not only the damaged furniture was calling on Arkansaw. On one of the gaming tables he had had some heavy bets piled up. This table was now empty, and overturned.

"I presume the friends of the gentleman here will liquidate all damages!" and the Hummer pointed to the bound man. "He was the cause of it all. You will bear witness to that, yourself, I feel sure."

"But the money!" the proprietor continued. "I had a stack of it on that board, an' ever cent's gone."

Hartsook's eyes kindled.

"I didn't take it, Arkansaw, and you ought to know me well enough to know I didn't."

The Cuckoo proprietor, realizing that he was treading on dangerous ground, but unable to control his wrath, turned upon the hapless Tim.

"This is all your work! An' you done it a purpose to let some o' yer pals come in and rake the swag."

He advanced as if on the point of hurling the offending man into the street. But he thought better of it, and turned to a constable standing near.

"Take 'im to the lock-up," he ordered. "I'll see if I'm to be tromped on this way. Clear 'im out o' hyer, an' to one't!"

Now, this was a thing which Pendergast was particularly desirous of shunning, for he feared that Whisky Tim might "peach" if placed under arrest. He had hoped that the hummer would not only kill Hartsook, but would be killed himself, and thus all peril of his complicity in the affair be avoided. Tim had failed, and very probably was feeling somewhat bitter against the man who had tempted him into making the attack.

He coughed loudly and managed to attract the proprietor's attention. Arkansaw caught the negative look in his eye.

"Jist bundle him into the street!" he added, hastily correcting his order. "Roll him out, take them cords off'n him, an' let him go. He hain't wuth foolin' with; an' they hain't no use o' puttin' the town to no costs a-tryin' sich cattle. Bundle 'im out!"

So, Whisky Tim was dragged into the street; and what might have been a tragedy ended as a farce.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BAR-MAID'S WARNING.

ALTHOUGH it was late that night, before the crowd thinned out and the last laggard went his way, Lariat Bill remained. A whispered word from Betty Blessington was the cause.

"You saw the fight," she said, knowing full well that he did.

"What they was to see uv it."

"Which wasn't much," Betty confessed.

"That was my fault, too. Arkansaw has been fixing up the Nest a good deal lately, you see; and has had the lights arranged so that all can be turned out at once. And so, to keep any one from being killed, I turned them out as soon as Whisky Tim commenced his shooting."

She laughed a little, and her black eyes shone bewitchingly.

"And I done it without any one being the wiser. They were all looking at Tim and the Hummer, and the men around the table, and never thought of noticing me."

"An' what a row it *did* kick up! Sounded jist fer all the worl' like a passel o' dogs an' cats a-fightin'. Sich yowlin' an' screechin' a body never heerd!"

He almost forgot his awkwardness in his enthusiasm.

"Jist look at them bullet-holes. Tim never made all them. He couldn't, ye see. Some other fellers must 'a' pulled their shooters an' went to poppin' away at the dark. Sing'lar how 'tarnal crazy men do git at sich a time. A herd o' stampedin' hosses ain't nowheres."

The hostler surveyed the walls critically, dilating on the bullet-marks with as much apparent pleasure as if they had been ornaments.

"Oh, I tell you, Arkansaw was mad!" Betty asserted. "I don't think I've ever seen him madder since I've been here. He was just hopping!"

"Twill cost him a lot o' dust to fix things back jist as they was!" was Lariat's thoughtful observation.

Betty did not immediately reply, but continued to look at the bullet-marks.

"I'm afraid we're talking too loud. Some one might be listening."

Lariat Bill took the hint and came close up to the bar.

"Wasn't you afraid the bullets might ketch

ye?" his mind still dwelling on the scarred walls.

She looked around nervously, then laughed a little.

"Arkansaw wouldn't have it known for anything, for he pretends to be very brave. And is brave enough; for only a fool puts himself in the way of being killed."

"This bar," and Betty tapped it with her finger, "is heavily lined on the inside with sheet-iron. No one would ever think it, for the iron is painted and grained like wood-work. Arkansaw don't propose to take any chances. There's a row in here every week or two."

"Well, as soon as I'd turned out the lights, I got behind here, and felt safe enough."

"And Arkansaw?"

Betty's eyes sparkled with fun.

"He done the same. I know, for I heard him breathing hard and whispering terrible swear words."

"An' me! What do ye reckon I was a-doin'?"

"Running, I expect."

"Hanged if I was! I was the last man to leave the house."

"Oh!" and Betty lifted her black brows interrogatively.

"It's a fac!" the hostler declared.

He bent nearer to her.

"I was a-helplin' the Hummer. As soon as the lights went out I jumped onto Whisky Tim an' took his gun from 'im. Then me an' the Hummer held 'im down, and jist everlastin'ly hugged the floor while t'other fellers was a shootin' an' a-screechin' an' a-climbin' over each other."

"Then, when the room cleared, we tied 'im up till he couldn't wiggle, an' stuck that pistol bar'l into his mouth. Arter which I made fer the street; an' the Hummer struck a light to invite the crowd to come back."

"Strange Tim didn't say anything about that!"

"I 'low he was too drunk to know whether 'twas one man had bolt o' him er a dozen."

"It'll cost Arkansaw a good 'eal!" repeating the thought that had come to him a while before.

"Tim ain't wuth nothin' an' I don't s'pose he'll try to make the Hummer pay."

"I don't think it'll cost him anything," said Betty. "Pendergast will pay for it, if I'm not much mistaken."

The hostler looked at her questioningly.

"That's what I wanted you to stay for," lowering her voice still further and looking nervously around. "It's something I want you to tell Mr. Hartsook."

Lariat Bill was mystified.

"There was a good deal of excitement, you know, after the fight. And there was a big crowd, all talking at once, and paying not much attention to anything."

"After Whisky Tim had been put out, I saw Pendergast follow him; and he didn't come back for a while. I'd been watching Pendergast; and when he went out, there was something in his looks that interested me. I was almost sure that he would have a talk with Tim. So, when no one was looking, I slipped out, too."

"Pendergast had taken Tim into the shadows just around the building. I didn't know this, at first; but as I couldn't see 'em on the street, I began to hunt for 'em."

"I crawled to the rear corner of the house, and that put me within a half-dozen feet of where they were standing. That is, Pendergast was standing, and Tim was trying to stand, braced against a tree."

"They were talking about the fight, and this is what I heard Pendergast say. I want you to remember the words:

"'You made a failure of it, Tim, this time; but I'm sure you'll have better luck next time. For, you must try again. Hartsook is quick as a cat, which is a thing you'll have to look out for. Next time you'd better take another tack. Don't tackle him boldly; but lay for him in an alley some dark night and shoot him down.'"

"Those are just the words, for I took particular care to recollect them. Then the judge give him some money, and left him there."

The revelation was a surprise to Lariat, notwithstanding the fact that his eyes had been much opened of late to the judge's perfidy.

"Pendergast is determined that Whisky Tim shall kill Mr. Hartsook; and I want you to give him warning."

"You bet, I'll do that!" the honest fellow replied, a great admiration for Betty's generalship showing in his countenance.

"What I'm afraid of," she went on, "is that Mr. Hartsook will pay no attention to it. But Whisky Tim's pistol can shoot as hard as any man's. He mightn't amount to much in a fair fight, but 'tain't to be a fair fight. Tim is to play snake-in-the-grass, and strike without warning."

Lariat Bill was much impressed by her words and her intense earnestness.

"I'll tell 'im," he reiterated. "I'll tell 'im jist what you say. And there'll be two playin' snake-in-the-grass—me an' Tim: fer I don't perpose to have the Hummer dropped in his tracks no sich way."

"I know'd you wouldn't!" and Betty smiled approvingly. "Now, you'd better be going, for I'm getting awfully afraid of Arkansaw."

CHAPTER XXII.

AN EMPTY TRAP.

WAS it regard for the interests of the friends of Lariat Bill, or did some other reason impel Betty Blessington to keep her eyes and ears open and closely watch her employer?

The hostler had not been gone long when Arkansaw returned, having been discussing the affair of the evening with some cronies.

He was not in a pleasant mood; his losses that night had been heavy, and did not lie lightly on his mind. In addition, he had seen Lariat Bill leave the Cuckoo's Nest at that unseemly hour, and was not pleased thereat.

But he held his tongue, and gave Betty no inkling of his secret thoughts.

"Purty nigh time to close the shop," he said, coaxing a smile of affability to his face as he came in. "But we'll have to clean up this muss a bit, fu'st. Hang a lot o' fools what ain't got no more sense than to go an' bu'st things up in this way!"

"It's the penalty of the business!" and Betty returned the smile. "A nest like the Cuckoo's Nest is pretty likely to be feathered with broken glass and splintered furniture."

"I could 'a' smashed the hull outfit fer it!" he growled, as he swept the debris into a heap and pushed it toward the door. "There's a lot o' good dollars all gone to thunder! And jist because two men wanted to git at each other in hyer. Why can't they go out doors when they want to shoot and raise a row, that's what I'd like to know?"

Betty worked willingly, and soon the room was put in a fairly presentable condition.

Then Arkansaw said she need remain no longer, and that he would put up the shutters and attend to the closing himself.

Betty's retirement was not for the purpose of rest, however, so far as she was concerned. She stationed herself in the corridor leading to her sleeping apartment, and kept close watch on the interior of the saloon.

After a little she was rewarded by seeing Judge Pendergast enter, followed at short intervals by the gamblers, Cockney Joe, Silk-Hat Sid and Sam Turnbull.

"They're going to have another talk," she whispered, her interest increased by the entrance of the trio. "I must hear it!"

She slipped into her room; but came back soon after, minus her shoes.

The corridor she was in connected with the one leading to Judge Pendergast's apartment; and into the latter corridor she stealthily hurried.

Arriving before his door, she drew a key from her pocket, applied it to the lock, and swung the door open. Then she softly closed and re-locked it.

She stopped a moment, with her head inclined in a listening attitude.

"Some one's coming up the stairway!" with an air of excitement. "I must be quick."

There was a closet in the room; and this she unlocked as she had done the door. Closing it upon herself, she crouched in the darkness awaiting the coming of the author of the footsteps.

She heard him approach the door, then enter, but the room being shrouded in gloom could see nothing.

There was the scratching of a match, followed by the lighting of a lamp. In the closet door was a tiny hole, and through this she looked and saw Judge Pendergast.

Then there came to her ears the sounds of other footsteps; the sounds followed soon after by the entrance of Arkansaw Tom and the trio of gamblers.

Pendergast placed a bottle and some glasses on the table.

"Here's some good liquor. It's better than most of the truck our friend Arkansaw dispenses to a thirsty public. Help yourselves."

The bar-maid smiled complacently. She was evidently pleased with her location, and anticipated some valuable revelations. It was quite manifest, or would have been could there have been an observer, that her position in the closet was not an especially novel one. She seemed to have been there before, on similar missions bent.

Betty would not have felt so much at ease, however, could she have understood all. Arkansaw Tom had been closely observing her movements since noting her conversation with Lariat Bill. He had not heard what had been said in that conversation, but her manner and actions while conversing with the hostler had aroused his distrust.

He had been lurking in the shadows at a bend of the stairway, saw her come from her room shoeless, and go in the direction of the other corridor. At this he had slipped off his own shoes, followed her, and observed her as she entered Pendergast's apartment.

"It's powerful good liquor!" he said, pouring some in a glass and sipping it. "But you've got better'n that in that air closet er I miss my guess."

Pendergast laughed hollowly and looked in the direction indicated.

"Yes; I have a bottle or two that I keep for special occasions only. I thought this would do for to-night."

"This is a high-up crowd, jedge, an' the best o' liquor ain't any too good fer 'em!" winking

knowingly at the gamblers who had seated themselves opposite.

A nervous thrill swept over the bar-maid. Through the little hole in the door she caught the sinister wink, and had also observed the judge's peculiar look as he glanced in her direction.

"I've been seen," she thought. "And they'll be coming here in a minute pretending to look for that liquor. I just know there isn't any liquor in here."

To satisfy herself, she felt carefully over the closet floor. There were no bottles of any kind to be found.

But Arkansaw Tom was in no hurry to press his investigations. He desired to tease her, having much the same feeling as the cat holds for the mouse before crushing it.

"How many bottles is there in there, judge?" and he lifted his glass to his lips to conceal a smile of satisfaction. "Is it two bottles or three bottles? I seen 'em onc't, but plague if I hain't fergot!"

"Two bottles," said Pendergast, helping himself to the liquor on the table, and passing it to Cockney Joe.

"Ere's to success in hall hour henterprises! Women hand wine his the song hof the poets. Which Hi love most 'anged hif Hi know. When we can 'ave both together 'ow lovely hit will be!"

He lifted the glass to his lips in a mock heroic way, and cocked an eye toward the closet.

"Cockney's growing quite sentimental!" and Silk-Hat Sid stared at the Briton through his eye-glasses. "Woman, lovely woman! If I could just remember the words of the bard:

"O, woman, in our hours of ease,
Uncertain, coy, and hard to please,
When thou dost with the bottles mingle,
And make the rattling glasses jingle,
We love thee!"

He clinked his glass against Cockney's, pressed it to his lips, and turned to Turnbull.

"Woman, is it?" said the latter, lifting his glass. "Well, I ain't neither a philosopher nor a poet, nor am I slick-tongued like the gentleman who has preceded me. But I'll do the best I can. May she watch us constantly, observe all our movements, hear all we say, hand us good liquor over the bar, and give us good luck at the gaming-table!"

"Speakin' about good liquor," and Arkansaw Tom turned again toward the closet. "I say, judge, when air ye goin' to bring out them bottles?"

"If you're determined to drink every drop of good liquor I've got," and the judge affected a frown, "why, I suppose I'll have to bring it out now!"

He took a key from his pocket and moved toward the door, the others rising to their feet as he did so.

With much noise and ostentatious fumbling he turned the key in the lock, and then threw the door wide open.

He started back with a cry of astonishment—his cry being echoed by his friends.

The closet was empty!

Through a hole in the floor the bar-maid had made her escape.

"What does this mean?" and Pendergast turned a more sickly pallor than usual.

Cockney Joe, who had sprung for the lamp, came forward with it, and flashed its rays into the recess.

There could be no mistake. The closet was empty, and the gaping hole attested the means of escape. Near the hole, which was a square one, was the piece of board which the bar-maid had lifted out. It was fitted to join closely into the aperture, having in fact been a portion of the original floor, and the seams had been hidden by the oblong strip of carpet which the judge kept on the bottom of the closet.

The panic-stricken gamblers stared at each other in amazement, scarcely able to credit the testimony of their senses.

"She's a deep and damnable woman, and a dangerous one!" exclaimed Pendergast. "Ten to one she's a spy in the service of Old Adamant! There can be no doubt that's just what she is. And, gentlemen, she's hid in this closet every night, probably, since she's been here, and has heard every word we've said."

Arkansaw Tom uttered a furious oath.

"I'll choke her soon's I lay my hands on her!"

"You'll do nothing of the kind! Give me time to think. We must do something. What is it? Luckily she didn't hear anything to-night—that she can use!"

"Gen'lemen!" said Arkansaw, with great solemnity. "This floors me. How'd that hole git there, I'd like to know? I built this hyer house, and it wasn't never put in there at my orders. Does the carpenter have a right to cut a feller's house in that air way?"

"It wasn't the carpenter, my dear friend!" and Silk-Hat Sid forgot to fiddle with his glasses, so anxious was he. "It wasn't the carpenter!"

"A woman couldn't 'a' made a j'int like that!"

"And it wasn't a woman. I'll bet a faro bank against a ten-penny nail that it was the Hummer from Hummingbird!"

"We can't discover anything standing here!" and Pendergast came out of his study with a jerk of impatience. "I don't know how long ago it's been since she left this closet, but it can't have been a great while. She must still be on the premises. If we hadn't fooled away our time as we did we might have caught her. Now, we must find her."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PLEASING REPORT.

"WHERE does this trap lead to?" he asked of Arkansaw.

"Hanged if I know!" and the proprietor looked bewildered. "As I said, I never cut this hole in hyer. It must lead to the cellar, though. The room below this is on'y an old store-room, and nothing but the stairway to the cellar goes out'n it!"

"Then lead the way, and we'll soon find out. Hold! I'll lead the way!"

He pushed past Arkansaw, held the lamp near the aperture, and was about to swing down, or take a further survey.

"Hello! Here's a ladder!"

He held the light through the opening to illuminate the room below.

"You haven't been keeping a very close watch over this room, have you, Arkansaw?"

"Didn't suppose they was any use. Who'd 'a' thought o' a thing like that?"

Pendergast handed the lamp to Turnbull, swung himself through the opening and placed his feet on the ladder, which was a very light and shaky affair. Then he climbed to the floor below, the others following, Turnbull handing down the light before he descended.

"I see through it, I think!" and the judge's keen eye swept the place. "This ladder was only placed here this evening. It has been kept in concealment at other times. She calculated we would go to that room to talk matters over after the fight, and so prepared for us. She brought this here before you discovered her spying in the corridor!"

"Jist lemme git my grip onto her!" Arkansaw gritted, for the closing sentence had been directed to him. "She'll be apt to think twice't afore tryin' anything like that again."

"Don't do anything rash!" Pendergast cautioned. "Wait for orders. Maybe we can get more knowledge by a few threats judiciously applied than by all the choking. But it's catching before hanging!"

He pulled down the ladder and tossed it into a corner.

"She didn't take that away because she was in a hurry, thinking she would soon be pursued, and because she knows she can't use the closet any more, anyway."

He took the lamp and again led the way.

As Arkansaw had stated, the only means of egress was by the hole leading into the cellar. But they plunged into this, scaring some mice from their coverts; and made their way toward the coal-hole opening on the street.

"She went out here!" the judge declared. "There's no other way for her to have gone out. If we had only had a man here!"

He blew out the light and prepared to ascend.

"But we didn't, and there's no use in fretting. We might as well say, if we had had a man below the trap-door! She's beaten us this time. But she'll be wiser than I think she is, if she does it again."

It was almost morning as the harassed men climbed painfully out at the coal-hole. The experiences of the last hour had been most distressing. How much had the bar-maid learned by her spying? How many nights had she listened to their talk, hidden behind that closet door? Was she a spy in the employ of Old Adamant or the Hummingbird Hummer?

They were questions which could not be given a direct answer. All the evidence, however, pointed as strongly as circumstantial evidence can to the conclusion that she was allied with their enemies and had taken a position at the Cuckoo's Nest for the sole purpose of aiding in their ruin.

They were furious as they made their way to the bar-room.

But Betty was not there.

"She has retreated to her own apartment," suggested Pendergast. "Let her alone for to-night. And don't do anything, or say anything, yet. Maybe we can turn this to our own account."

He called for a glass of liquor.

"Might fetch some of that down from the closet!" was the comment of Silk-Hat Sid, whom no untoward event could quite suppress. "You were saying it was mighty good."

"Not if you're to spout any more poetry to lovely woman!" and Turnbull tried to laugh.

"What blooming idiots we must 'ave seemed!" put in Cockney Joe. "Hit fairly makes me sick just to think hof it!"

They were interrupted by the entrance of Blinky Jim.

"Any news?" Pendergast asked, turning somewhat testily on him. "If not, it's too late for you to be here."

"A report!" said Jim, unabashed, and having

no fear of the gamblers or Arkansaw, in whose presence he had made previous reports.

"What is it?" and Pendergast placed his back against the bar and looked keenly at the newcomer.

"The young feller is dead!"

"Who? Not Ralph Raymond?" and a sudden joy came into the judge's tones.

"The very identikel. He's dead. We killed 'im."

"How was it? Tell me all about it."

Usually so calm, the judge could not now control his impatience.

"Well, ye see it wuz this way," with an important hitch at his trousers. "The feller got the chains off his han's an' feet, jumped past Jenkins, who wuz a-settin' in the door a-smokin' an' made fer the hills. Jed had a Winchester layin' there, an' he jes' everlastin'ly fetched 'im. Bullet went clean through 'im, an' he wuz dead ez a door-nail time we got to whur he fell. 'Twuz ez good a shot ez I ever see."

"A glass of liquor, Arkansaw!"

When the liquor was poured out, the judge pushed it toward Blinky.

"Lyer's to your 'ealth," and the scoundrel eyed the stuff before swallowing it. "Ef ye sends any men to us to keep, we'll keep 'em er kill 'em!"

The judge dropped a ten-dollar coin into his hands.

"You did just right! What did you do with him?" as coolly as if inquiring about the disposal of the body of a range steer.

"Buried him right there!" and the smile that overspread Blinky's face was distorted by the series of eye-twitchings that accompanied it.

The judge ordered another drink, and with further commendations dismissed the man.

"Gents," turning to the four gathered about him, "that gives me an idea—an idea that can be worked."

He looked toward the street and up and down the room.

"Of course we can't be heard! And I fancy we've stopped spying for a time. And, besides, if any precautions were to be taken, they should have been taken before Blinky made his report."

"What's to hinder us from trapping Adamant and Hartsook and sending them to this pleasant resort in the mountains. The climate and the water are good, and their health oughtn't to suffer by the change. But—if it should, we've got a graveyard started."

The suggestion came with such suddenness that the others hardly knew what to say.

"The very thing!" Turnbull declared, after mature reflection. "It can be made to work. And if they should try to get away?"

"Which they'd be sure to do!" Pendergast interposed, with a meaning smile.

"Why, we've got some excellent rifle-shots who'll be lying about handy."

"Smoking their pipes and waiting for the said prisoners to twist the chains off their hands and feet!" and Silk-Hat Sid completed the thought.

"It's a good plan!" averred the judge, pleased that the others so readily fell in with his scheme. "The best thing I've dropped onto in a long while. And it will work. We'll make it work!"

"And when they are out of the way," pulling softly at his white mustache, "we can tell their dear supporters, or if we can't tell them ourselves we can find others to tell them, that their very fine friends have been discovered to be a couple of criminals, and had to take leg-bail to escape from the officers that were after them. And if that don't make the friends of these men, who are now talking so big against the tough element of the camp, sick as locoed bronchos, then I miss my guess!"

Silk-Hat Sid slapped this thigh enthusiastically.

"The very thing! It will just make me feel good all over to be able to take their high-mightinesses down a peg!"

And thus was formed a plot the most perilous to Adamant and Hartsook of any that had yet been conceived in Pendergast's daring brain.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CAUGHT NAPPING.

"We ought to git away with 'em easy 'nough—two ag'in' one!"

Two men crouched in an unfrequented alley, in the shadow of a deserted building. Only a faint moon lit up the surroundings.

The men were Jed Jenkins and Blinky Jim. Each clutched a coiled lasso; and they seemed in an excited and nervous frame of mind, as they peered out along the street.

"I don't like the job so turrible!" Blinky observed, drawing his head back into the shadow as a tortoise draws its head into its shell. "Ef it wuzn't fer the money I wouldn't hev a thing to do with it. But you bet the judge is good pay! Whacks up ever' time jes' like a gen'leman."

"He's a-fizzerin' on us a-layin' the chap out w'en we git 'im into the hills, same ez we did Raymond!" and a horrible grin disfigured Jenkins's face.

"I 'low you're w'ot kin do it!" with a responsive grin. "Thet air ole rifle o' yours is a reacher, I'd 'most hate to be in the next county an' let ye shoot it at me. I'd be at-ellygraphin' fer my coffin soon ez I seen the smoke."

It was the night following the events just related. Judge Pendergast had proceeded with his customary promptness to put his last scheme into operation. Blinky Jim had not yet left the town; but, on the contrary, was haunting the drinking dens of the place, even before they opened for the day, anxious to squander the money the judge had given him.

Hence, it was not difficult for Pendergast to find him and lay before him the plan recently mapped out.

Having done which, and sent Blinky in search of Jenkins, the judge went home for a few hours of much-needed rest.

The tremendous pressure of the past few weeks was beginning to tell on him, and the appearance of premature age grew on him apace. The pallor of his cheeks had deepened, fits of nervous trembling seized him at times, and he found that he could not stand the work and dissipation, combined with late hours, to which he had so long been accustomed.

He was not seen on the streets again until nightfall; then he managed to hold surreptitious conference with the pair of villains whom he had chosen to do his work. He made his way to the Cuckoo's Nest so that, come what might, he could not be shown to be in complicity with the twain.

"I reckon he'll be along hyer purty soon, now!" and Blinky again poked his head from the shadow. "The boss said he'd come by ever' night at about this time. 'Twould be a go ef he should take a cross-cut on us, an' leave us alone hyer jst a-chawin' wind. 'Twould so!"

The growling comment might have been continued had not two figures come in sight, advancing up the deserted street in the direction of the alley.

"Git yer rope!" Blinky ordered.

Jenkins thrust out his head and took a survey.

"I don't like thet!" he declared. "There's two on 'em, and the jedge said 't they wouldn't be on'y one. I reckon, now, he can't be a-goin' fer to play no roots onto us?"

Blinky Jim was no better pleased than was his companion at the prospect.

"Mebbe they ain't nary one Ole Adamant!" in a tone that showed he hoped this might be the case.

But they were not left long in doubt on this point. The tall, thin, half-stooping form of the Man of Rock was soon near enough to be readily recognized, uncertain as was the light.

"An' t'other's thet infernal Hummer!" Jenkins grumbled. "An' he's a fighter from Wayback. I've half a notion to throw up the job."

"His fightin' won't do 'im no good ef we git one o' these ropes over his neck!" and Blinky spread out the coils of his lasso to be in readiness for the anticipated cast.

All unconscious of the fact that a pair of desperate scoundrels were lying in wait for them, the two men came on.

As they stepped from the plank sidewalk into the roadway of the alley, the nooses, hurled with true, quick aim, whistled through the air. Each, in snaky folds, dropped over the neck of its intended victim, and tightened.

The surprise was complete; and Adamant, wholly unused to such methods of warfare, was jerked from his feet.

Not so with the other, who was not Hartsook at all, but Lariat Bill Jackson, a man used to every possible maneuver with a rope.

As soon as his ear caught the ominous whistle he understood its meaning. With deft movement he gripped his knife, and threw up his hand just as the noose descended. The keen edge of the blade was thus interposed between the noose and his neck, and as the rope tightened a stroke of the blade severed it.

This was a movement wholly unexpected by Blinky Jim, who, surging back on the rope as the strands parted, fell headlong.

Jenkins, however, whose rope had done more effective work, was ready to come to his pal's assistance, for Adamant had been almost instantly choked into unconsciousness.

Realizing that quick work was necessary, and still thinking the deft handler of the knife to be the Hummer from Hummingbird, he rushed upon the hostler.

At the same instant Blinky scrambled from his prostrate position, and came at Lariat.

The struggle that ensued was as silent almost as it was terrible. The hostler was a strong man, and, armed as he was with the knife, a most dangerous foe.

He aimed a blow at Jenkins, who was advancing on him from the direction of the street. This the latter skillfully avoided, while at the same time Blinky Jim clasped the common enemy about the legs and body.

The effect was to cause both to roll together in the dirt.

Lariat Bill tried to get in position to use his

knife, but was prevented from doing so by the agility of the man he was fighting, and by the movements of Jenkins.

At length he freed his knife-hand and raised the blade, but the hand was clutched by the watchful Jenkins, and such a blow dealt it that the knife was forced from its grasp.

Thus weaponless, the hostler could do nothing but struggle and strain with all his might in an endeavor to free himself. But this he found impossible. The combined strength of his foes was too great, and after a most exhausting combat, lasting fully five minutes, the scales of victory turned in favor of the stronger force.

In a trice, while Jenkins held Lariat panting on his back in the dirt, Blinky slipped over his hands and feet the identical rope whose noose had been avoided.

And thus ended the fight.

It did not end too quick for the safety of the assailants. The rope about the neck of Old Adamant loosened its hold somewhat when it dropped from the hands of the caster, and thus the deadly, choking sensation had been mitigated. This was having its effect, and as Lariat was submitting with what grace he could to the pinioning of his arms and legs, the Man of Rock came out of the borders of death and back to life and sensibility.

Not at all, however, did he realize what had befallen him or even where he was. When he did, he tried to spring to his feet, thinking it might not yet be too late to strike a blow in behalf of himself and friend.

But the watchful outlaws were on him at the first movement; and he was bound and secured as the hostler had been.

"Now, pull 'em back into the alley!" Jenkins commanded, wiping the streaming perspiration from his heated face. "Some 'un may come along hyer d'reckly, an' we'll have another row on our han's!"

"Which the same yer humble serviant hain't a-hankerin' fer jes' at this speakin'!" Blinky observed, laying Lariat by the heels and pulling him into the gloom of the alley.

A cry of surprise caused him to stop.

"W'ot air ye a-yellin' fer?" he queried of Jenkins in reproof.

"Tain't the Hummer 'tall!" the latter ejaculated.

A bar of moonlight had played for a moment on the hostler's face as he was being moved.

"W'ot air ye a-givin' me?" inquired the incredulous Blinky.

"Jes' gobs o' solid fact; thet's w'ot! 'Tain't the Hummer. It's thet measly Lariat Bill!"

In spite of the danger, Blinky struck a match on his knee and flashed its light into the face of his charge.

The truth of Jenkins's statement was confirmed.

"Too late to swap, now!" blowing out the light. "If we'd let 'im loose now he'd hike right fer some pards o' his'n, an' we'd hev a bigger fight onto our han's then this'n's been. Better haul 'im back hyer, an' ef he sqawks jab his sticker into 'im!"

Delay was dangerous, as Jenkins felt to the full; and without further questioning or comment he followed the example of his pal, and dragged his prisoner into the dense shadows further up the alley.

"Now, w'ot'll we do?" Blinky asked, stopping to rest, and breathing so heavily he could scarcely articulate. "No use in takin' this critter any furdur, is it? He's hefty as all git out. T'other'n 'll make a load fer both o' us!"

"Leave 'im jes' ez he is!" suggested Jenkins. "Why not? He can't git away, ef we do; an' it'll likely be mornin' 'fore anybody comes a-huntin' of him."

The suggestion was so good that a gag was forced into Lariat's mouth; and then, bearing Adamant between them, the pair of villains made their way out at the other end of the alley.

But they were not aware that the rope king was even then, before they were out of sight, tugging at his bonds, with fair prospects of releasing himself in a few minutes.

CHAPTER XXV.

HELD IN THE HILLS.

THE position of Old Adamant was an unenviable one. He was so bound as to be perfectly helpless, and the dirty handkerchief which had been thrust into his mouth and tied behind his ears effectually prevented any outcry. In addition, his neck and throat ached with the most intense pain, the result of the severe choking.

He was fully sensible of his peril, and this it was that kept him quiet, for he was neither reckless nor foolhardy. He knew that an effort to escape could only result in failure, and subject him to blows and abuse.

From the talk of the men he knew that murder was not their immediate object and his knowledge of Lariat Bill's skillfulness in untying knots lent him hope.

There was only one dark and silent street for the men to cross, and a few straggling houses to pass. Then they were beyond the outskirts of the town, with the wilderness of hills before them.

Into a mass of scraggy and jungly brush they

crept. There were four horses in waiting here, tied to the bushes, but with no one keeping guard over them.

"The ole man hain't come yit!" Blinky observed, after thrashing the brush a little and uttering a low call. "He didn't 'low ez we'd finish the business up in sich short meter, likely. We air th' turrors o' the goldin' hills, though, when onc't we git started!"

"You bet!" said Jenkins, drawing his knife and picking his teeth with it in an endeavor to frighten the prisoner. "We is, so!"

This humorous mood passed away, however, as the minutes dragged by, and the one they were expecting failed to put in an appearance. A half-hour passed; Blinky Jim becoming so uneasy that he left the thicket and paced restlessly up and down in front of it, straining his eyes and ears in the direction of the town.

He knew that this delay added to their peril, for there was no telling when Lariat Bill might be discovered and pursuit be instituted.

"I moves we go on!" Jenkins drawled from the thicket, where he was keeping watch and ward over the Man of Rock. "I don't keer p'tic'larly about havin' thet Hummer an' a lot o' men a-straddle o' my neck."

Blinky Jim seemed much of the same opinion; but still he waited, and was rewarded eventually.

The new-comer was Judge Pendergast, closely hooded and with hat drawn over his eyes, and a disguising twist in his tones. He was not masked and garbed, however, as Captain Playfair. In that character he was unknown to Jed and Blinky, who, though they were great villains, were not members of Bozeman Jack's organization.

"How is he?" the judge questioned in a whisper.

"Snug ez a bug in a rug, an' happy ez a little pig in clover."

"I mean, does he know anything?" half angrily.

"You'll hev to ask 'im 'bout thet, yourself!" Blinky retorted, not pleased with the judge's manner. "Ef he ain't plum gone crazy I s'pose he knows who he is. We couldn't keep 'im choked fer a month."

"I came as quick as I could," said the judge, assuming a blunder air. "Now, get out the horses and we'll be off."

The men worked briskly enough, but their movements would have been much hastened had the judge told them that he had seen the hostler near the door of the Cuckoo's Nest but a short time before, though the hostler had not seen him.

There was nothing in the occurrence to attract Pendergast's attention. Lariat Bill was frequently to be seen near the door of the Cuckoo's Nest; and the men now in charge of Old Adamant had not told him of their encounter with the hostler and of how they had left him trussed up in the alley.

Adamant was bound on one of the horses; and the others being mounted, the journey toward the hills commenced.

But little was said on the way. Pendergast was very chary of words, fearing his tones, disguised as they were, might betray him. Jed and Blinky conversed occasionally in whispers.

It was a long and toilsome journey—to Adamant especially irritating and bewildering; for, after the town had been left a mile behind, a close bandage was placed over his eyes that he might not take note of the route.

The gray dawn was at hand when the cabin in the mountains was reached. It was a strongly-built affair, having but two rooms. There was no window, the light being admitted through the door and an opening between two of the logs. In strength it was a regular fortress, capable of brisk defense if held by courageous men.

All this Old Adamant saw, for on gaining the cabin the blinding bandage had been removed from his eyes, and the light of the coming day was sufficient to enable him to take in the details of the place.

He was taken to the room further removed from the door, this room being so arranged that egress could only be obtained from it by passing through the one occupied by the guards as a living and sleeping apartment.

The door connecting the two rooms was a ponderous affair, held in place by heavy wooden bars, fastening on the side next the guards.

On being thrust into this prison, the bonds were removed from his wrists and ankles. As a substitute, an iron, connecting with a chain bolted to the wall, was fastened to one leg.

"You see this hyer lock," said Blinky, taking particular pains to call the prisoner's attention to it. "The last man w'ot wore this hyer bu'sted the combination, as you may say, so thet it won't work extra good any more. Seein' uv which, an' gittin' it through his cranium thet he could pick it an' skip, he tuk leg-bail one mornin'. An' the same bein' observed by my pard, the chap wuz perfrated wi' a Winchester."

There was in Blinky's words something to suggest that he hoped this prisoner would do likewise.

Adamant glanced curiously at the lock, and a grim smile crept into his face.

"Whether it's of any force or not will not matter, I fancy, if you keep those big bars on the door."

Having, as he afterward observed, given the prisoner "suthin' fer his thinker to chew on," Blinker fastened the chain and retreated to the other room.

Some conversation followed between the three. This Adamant could hear in a measure, though the words were for the greater part indistinct.

Then he heard the trio leave the room and pass around the house.

"There she is!" said Jenkins.

And Adamant, peering through the chink in the wall, saw him point to a grave-shaped mound.

"I hed a notion," and Blinkey expanded his features in what he intended as a humorous grin. "I hed a notion to stick up a bit o' pine board fer a head-stun, and carve on it some poetry, an' the words:

"Hyer lays Ralph Raymond. He broke jail and went to Kingdom-Come wi' a Winchester ball through his gizzard;—bein' wept over an' planted by the man w'ot held the Winchester—an' may he rest in peace."

"'Twould 'a' looked handsome," Jenkins commented. "But we wuz afeared ez how it might be looked on by somebuddy ez we wouldn't wish fer to see it."

Pendergast said nothing in reply, realizing perhaps that the men were talking more to be heard than making statements of what they had actually thought of doing.

The light in the east was growing brighter and brighter, a fact tending to made the judge nervous and uneasy; and when he had listened to a re-narration of the manner in which Raymond had met his death, he mounted his horse and rode rapidly away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

STARTLING NEWS.

It was again night when Judge Pendergast re-entered Cuckoo. He had tied his horse near the trail just beyond town, and walked in, intending to send for the animal later on; he had taken a long nap in the hills that day, and, in consequence, felt much fresher than usual.

He had a short conference with Arkansaw and his gambling friends and then, feeling weary and hungry, went home.

Edith did not appear at the supper-table; which excited no comment, however, as such absences had been frequent of late.

Mollie Stubbs waited at the table. There was much suppressed excitement in her manner, and she hovered near the judge as if anxious to speak to him.

Pendergast observed this finally; and when he had finished, invited her into the library, as he had done on a previous occasion.

"You have been trying to earn your money, eh?" when they were closeted there together. "I've been thinking it's time you made some discovery, if any discovery is to be made."

Thus encouraged, Mollie plumped herself into a chair, smoothed out her apron, and began:

"You're right, jedge! I have discovered somethin'!"

She paused to impress on him the wonders of the revelation to come.

"Mr. Hummer has been here ag'in, and he's seen Edith; and they had a talk about you."

The judge crossed his legs easily, and with one nervous hand smoothed his white mustache. He was not to be enticed into any show of undue anxiety.

"'Twas about money and property, an' mines!" the servant continued, not pleased with this lack of interest in what she believed an important bit of information, and determined to stir him into a show of curiosity.

This time she was not unsuccessful, for at the mention of property and mines, the judge had slightly changed color.

"Yes, mines!" she repeated.

"Well, go on, woman!" testily. "What's the use of beating about the brush? If you have a story to tell, tell it. You can help earn your money in that way as well as in another."

Thus adjured, and seeing she had come off victor to this extent, she hesitated no longer, but plunged into her account.

"'Twas about the Gold Bug Mine!" qualifying her statement slightly. "Which, jedgein' by what I heerd, b'longs to Miss Edith. Mr. Hummer told 'her it was worth about fifty thousand dollars, as near as he could make out; an' that while it hadn't been a-payin' much some time ago, it was now a-payin' purty big."

"Go on!" Pendergast commanded.

"An' he said that you was now rushin' the work in it, an' squeezin' it—them's the words, jedge—squeezin' it fer all it was worth—a-takin' everything out and puttin' nothin' back in; an' that you was a-doing that because you was jist now dreadful pressed fer money. An' that if it went on that way a great while longer, the mine would be almost ruined, what with the water a-collectin' an' the timber a-rotting, an' sich."

She stopped to gain breath and to observe the effect.

"An' that wasn't all he said, jedge; ner the half, ner the worst. He tole Miss Edith that he had found out fer a fact that you wasn't her paw!"

The judge started violently, but with an effort succeeded in controlling himself; though when he sunk back in his chair he was shaking as with an ague-fit and his face was as ghastly the face of one dead.

"Say that again," he said. "You're sure shout that? Sure there can be no mistake?"

"I heerd it with my own two ears!" Miss Stubbs asserted, nodding her head in vigorous emphasis. "An' when I hear a thing I ginerly know it!"

"Certainly! Certainly! But go on with your story. What else did he say? Tell me everything. Every word!"

Miss Stubbs ruffled with the assumption of this new dignity. To be implored to do anything by the great Judge Lemuel Pendergast was glory indeed. Heretofore, he had commanded; and in very curt, sharp tones at that.

"He said that you not bein' her real paw there wouldn't be no trouble for Miss Edith to git this Gold Bug Mine out o' your hands, and go to a-runnin' it herself; and stop you gittin' the money and a-runnin' the property. That there could be no doubt you wasn't her paw; which was a question he had looked into purty clost and collected evidencé on: and this bein' so she would have to stand up fer her rights, sooner or later!"

Pendergast groaned inwardly, the ashen hue grew in his face, and his finger-nails rattled against the arms of the rocker.

"I will pay you for this, Mollie! I'll pay you well for it. Of course it's a lie; every word is an outrageous lie, made up wholly by this man, who hopes to ruin me because I would not hire him to work for me in the election. But it's well to know of such lies, when they're put afloat. Then one can prepare to meet them!"

"But what did Edith say? Did she believe this? It seems impossible!"

"I dunno if she did or not," Miss Stubbs confessed. "She was a-cryin' dreadful nearly the whole time he was talkin' to her."

"Then she doesn't believe it!" and the judge tried to assume an air of relief. "I knew she wouldn't!"

"But, what else did this scoundrel say?"

"Why, he went on to tell her how it all happened, jist to show her that he know'd what he was talking about."

"How what happened?"

"How you come to be a-pretendin' to be her paw, an' she actin' as if you was her paw."

"Go on!" the judge gasped.

"He said he'd traced the entire business back to the startin' p'int; that her paw had died long years ago, as she had always been told, and for a good while had believed; and how, finally, you come, sayin' that you was reely him, and that you hadn't been dead at all; and how you showed papers what had reely belonged to her true paw; seein' of which she had accepted you as sich."

"It's a lie!" hissed Pendergast. "A most villainous, diabolical lie! I'll kill Hartsook for that! I'll kill him!"

The pallor in his face had changed to a dull, livid hue.

Miss Stubbs drew back involuntarily, never having seen him in so bitter and violent a mood.

"Did he say anything else? Surely he didn't say anything else!"

"He said that he could prove all this in a court of jestic, and would when the proper time come; and he showed her some papers which she read over; and then she cried harder than ever."

Mollie smoothed back her thin, sandy hair.

"An' that's all, jedge. Unless"—and she hesitated—"unless he told her more before I got where I could hear, fer he'd been in the house a good bit before I da'st to try to git close up to the door an' listen."

"Good God! it's enough. I shouldn't want to hear more. It would run me crazy."

He had almost forgotten, in this outburst, that he was not alone.

He checked himself as the recollection came to him.

"To have such lies told on one is enough to run any one crazy, Mollie. You'll recognize that yourself!"

"Indeed it is!" admitted Miss Stubbs. "A dreadful thing to have yer daughter turn ag'inst ye in that way. As the poet says:

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a child what won't mind you!"

"Yes, it's a terrible thing!"

"Dreadful!" and the judge mopped his face.

"You'll not repeat this to any one, Mollie! You know I pay you as much for keeping still about what you hear, as for spyin'."

"I ain't no tattler," said Miss Stubbs. "I kin keep my mouth shet as well as the next one."

"I know you can; but I wanted to impress it on you."

"Now, I must be going. Keep a close watch, and see and hear everything that happens."

He took up his hat and hurried from the room, anxious to get out in the open, feeling that there he could think more clearly; for if ever there

was a time demanding clear thought, it was this time.

"I was shore he'd give me an extry fiver for that!" and Mollie wrinkled her brows discontentedly. "It was a risky business, spyin' on them two; an', hearin' what I did, seems to me he might 'a' give the extry. But he's a good paymaster, the jedge is, an' I hain't no 'casion to grumble."

But she did feel a little sore as she went back to the kitchen, her thoughts more on the judge and the effect her disclosure had had on him than on the work she was doing.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A WILD NIGHT-RIDE.

A PART of the conversation between Edith and Hartsook which Mollie Stubbs did not hear, related to the abduction of Old Adamant.

Not many minutes elapsed after the two men disappeared from the alley, bearing the Man of Rock, before Lariat Bill succeeded in freeing himself.

He went at once in search of Hartsook; and it was at this time, while he was hovering about the entrance to the Cuckoo's Nest, that Pendergast chanced to observe him. But he did not see the judge. Hartsook was not at Arkansaw Tom's at the time; but he came up a few moments later, and as soon as he had heard Lariat's story, he gathered a few friends about them and went in search of the retreating men.

The search proved a vain one, though it was kept up for several hours.

By means not necessary to be dilated on, now, they had been made aware of the fact that there was a cabin prison in the heart of the wilderness of hills lying back of the town. Its location had even been described to them.

Hence, not finding the judge and his captors in the vicinity of Cuckoo, the search was extended the next morning into the hill country.

It is a much easier matter, however, to fancy one can readily find his way to some isolated point in so wild a region, than it is to actually find it. The bare brown and rocky hills look so much alike that the mind is soon confused and bewildered; and the wide detours made necessary by interposing canyons and arroyas tend to unsettle memory and ideas of location.

It was after his return from this unsuccessful search that Hartsook had his conversation with Edith Pendergast.

Hartsook and Lariat Bill, both watching for the reappearance of Judge Pendergast, who they felt sure had been of the abducting party, saw him soon after he returned to the town. And from that moment they kept him under close surveillance.

On leaving the house, after hearing Mollie's story, the judge had another conference with his gambling pals.

He did not reveal what Miss Stubbs had told him; but, placing in the strongest light the peril all were in from Hartsook and Adamant, it was solemnly resolved that these men must be put out of the way.

Pendergast, feeling that his nervous system was on the point of giving way under the fearful strain, felt that he must seek rest before attempting anything else.

But though he returned home and swallowed an opiate, he gained only temporary relief. Not more than two hours did he sleep at the furthest. The drowsy god would not come again; and until almost morning he tossed and moaned restlessly.

Finally he got up and dressed, and going to his desk drew out writing material. He first wrote a number of letters on matters of general business, hesitating to approach the real task in hand.

This task was the drafting of certain instructions to Cockney Joe together with a map and description of the route to the cabin in the hills.

Day came while he was engaged in his work.

He had no appetite for breakfast; had in fact no thought for anything save the ideas he had been working out. He was deep in these, going over the points one by one, when breakfast was announced.

The call roused him from his reverie; but instead of going into the breakfast room he thrust the letters and papers hurriedly into his pocket and went up town.

He hoped to see Cockney Joe; but the Englishman was not to be found; and, literally worn out and so weak he could scarcely walk, the judge took another opiate washed down with a liberal quantity of brandy, and went to his room above stairs.

This time such overpowering, deadening sleep fell upon him that night was again at hand when he came out of it; and even then his mind was so dulled and confused that he could hardly connect the train of recent events.

Edith wondered why he should so absent himself from the house and from his meals that day; finally thinking, as night came on, that he might have returned and be closeted in his room.

To satisfy her curiosity on that point, she went to his apartment. It was empty, and the door ajar.

He did not permit Mollie to brush up the room, except at stated intervals, preferring that prying eyes should not too often be admitted.

It was in a state of much disorder; a number of papers being scattered upon the floor.

Edith stooped to pick these up. There were upon her face traces of recent tears, a visible moisture showing even then. But this disappeared, and a fiery flash came into the blue orbs, as she bent over one of the papers.

It was the map and description of the route, together with the instructions to Cockney Joe, drawn by Pendergast the night previous. In his haste to get up town, after being roused from his reverie by the call to breakfast, he had let this most important document fall to the floor unnoticed, as he thrust the mass of papers into his pocket.

Edith looked at it, with breath coming quick and fast and heart throbbing tumultuously. Then, calming her feelings as best she could, she slowly read it over.

The instructions filled her with terror. They were explicit, and very murderous, directing the Englishman to go as soon as possible to the cabin where Adamant was held, and on reaching it to cause the guards to slay the man in their charge:

"There must be no uncertainty on this point. They can let him make a break and shoot him, as they did the other fellow, or they can take some other course. But he must be put out of the way. Tell them this, and that I command it; and that big money is theirs as soon as the thing is done."

There were further statements, made in a rambling way, going to show that the Hummer was also to be sacrificed; but on this point there were no instructions, the writer seeming unable to think clearly after elaborating the first plan.

The paper was unsigned, and there was an effort at disguise of handwriting, though Edith recognized the penmanship instantly.

She thrust the writing into her bosom, and looked about like a scared fawn.

"Oh, this is dreadful! Something must be done, and at once. What shall it be? Let me think!"

She pressed her hands to her forehead, while her eyes seemed to burn. If ever there had been anything necessary to prove the heartlessness, the villainy and duplicity of the man calling himself her father, and to prove the truth of Hartsook's assertions, it was presented in this paper.

Like one drunken she staggered down the stairs and into her own room. She felt that she must have time to think. Old Adamant must be rescued and saved from the death which threatened, and the Hummer must be warned of the peril surrounding him.

The Hummer! He would know what to do.

She arose and went out to the stable in search of Lariat Bill. She knew of Lariat's friendliness and faithfulness, and that she could trust him.

The judge, for reasons of his own, still gave the hostler employment. But, Lariat Bill was not there.

The moments were slipping by, and even then the Englishman, Cockney Joe, might be en-route for the hills. He might have arrived there, long before, with newly-written instructions in his pockets. Old Adamant might ere this have been slain!

The thought was to her maddening.

"Oh, what shall I do?" she moaned—"what can I do?"

The contents of the paper had been seared into her brain. She could have repeated the writing word for word just as it was penned. She remembered every detail of the route, every description of the landmarks.

"I can't wait!" she declared. "I'll go myself!"

She went back to the house, and wrote a series of hasty instructions to Lariat Bill, and returning, placed them beneath the currycomb and brush in the little box against the wall, where he would be sure to find them—perhaps that night, at any rate as soon as he began work in the morning.

She had outlined a plan as daring as any ever originated by Pendergast.

She placed her saddle and bridle on the fleetest horse in the stable, led him out and mounted.

The night had come some time before; yet, notwithstanding this, she moved with great caution, fearing to be seen by Mollie Stubbs.

She gained the outskirts of the town without discovery, and, with a clear road before her for several miles, urged the fleet horse to his best gait.

When the rugged country was reached she was forced to slow her pace. Yet she pushed on with such energy that it was barely ten o'clock when she came in sight of the cabin.

Her hail brought the guards tumbling through the doorway.

At sight of them her worst fears were relieved. Cockney Joe was evidently not there.

Yet, and she started as if stung! Might he not have accomplished his mission and departed?

Only a moment was required, however, to dispel this fear.

"I have come with a message from my father," she said, boldly, for she had seen the men at the house on one occasion, and knew they must recognize her.

"You have with you the man known as Old Adamant!" trembling slightly in spite of her effort at repression. "You are to bring him at once to Cuckoo."

The guards exhibited considerable surprise at this.

"Seems kind o' queer, that do!" Blinky observed, pulling perplexedly at his frowzy pate. "We hain't hed 'im hyer sca'cely no time, ez ye might say."

The words, growling as they were, had lifted a load from Edith's heart.

"I don't know anything about that," with considerable curtness. "I only know what my orders are, and what your orders are. Judge Pendergast instructed me to come here as quick as I could, and tell you to bring Adamant to town at once."

Neither Blinky nor Jed had ever had any inkling of the estrangement between father and daughter, owing to their almost constant absence from the town. Hence, they were not suspicious as to the genuineness of the commands brought; though, as Blinky stated, they did think it remarkably queer that the judge should order Adamant's return so soon after bringing him there.

"The jedge is boss o' the round-up," Jenkins observed, "an' ef he wants the chap fetched in we kin fetch 'im!"

"And, make haste!" urged Edith, laboring under the ever-present fear of Cockney Joe's coming.

Before leaving home she had armed herself with a little revolver, which she intended to use should Cockney's appearance make it necessary: for a return to Cuckoo without the prisoner was a thought she refused to entertain for a moment.

She knew nothing of the grave behind the cabin, but sat her horse with much satisfaction and a feeling akin to content, as she watched the hurried preparations of Blinky and Jed.

The animals which had borne them and the prisoner there were lariat in an adjoining valley, so that no great time was lost in bringing them up. And, within a little over half-an-hour, all were mounted and on the return trail toward Cuckoo.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

LARIAT BILL'S love for horses, one of his most marked traits, was of material aid in the present emergency; for when he came back to the stable, an hour or more after Edith's departure, he took down the currycomb and brush, and so discovered Edith's letter.

He had lighted the stable lantern; and by its light read the communication. It stirred him almost as much as Pendergast's instructions to Cockney Joe had stirred Edith.

Fortunately for the success of Edith's plans, the last opiate with the liquor had been too much for even the hard-headed judge.

When he came out of the stupor in the evening, it required a long time for him to get the tangle of recent events straightened in his mind. His brain was oppressed, and he could not think clearly. Even when recollection returned to him, sufficient energy did not return with it to enable him to take up the work in hand.

Hence, he lingered in his room hour after hour, knowing he ought to busy himself, but unable to do so. And, finally giving way to the languor that benumbed every faculty, he ceased to try to think and sunk into another slumber.

The instructions in Edith's letter were imperative. But had they not been so, Lariat Bill's knowledge of all the facts in the case would have impelled him to instant action.

He put back the currycomb and brush, extinguished the lantern and left the stable, directing his steps toward the Cuckoo's Nest.

Hartsook was not there; but came along the pavement soon after.

Drawing him into the shadow, the hostler thrust the letter into his hands, and hurriedly told him of its contents.

The effect was like an electric shock.

"Get some horses," he commanded. "A half-dozen, as quick as you can! I'll look up some men."

Edith, in her letter, had told them just what she intended to do; and had given orders for them to go to a well-known landmark and there lie in ambush.

By the time Hartsook had collected four men whom he considered trustworthy, Lariat Bill had secured the horses.

"Now, if they'll only come with her!" and the Hummer smiled grimly as he swung into the saddle and gave the order for the advance.

"An' if they don't?" the hostler questioned.

"If they don't, we'll go to the cabin and bring them. There is a description of the route in that letter, and I don't think we can miss the way. We'll have Adamant back in Cuckoo before the coming of another day. And we'll nip some of the judge's fine plans in the bud!"

The horses were in good condition, and the men rode fast and hard, pressing on with such eagerness that the landmark was gained about the time Edith reached the cabin.

Here they went into hiding, watching with

what patience they could the direction from which Adamant and Edith and their escort were expected to come.

An hour slipped by; at the end of which time the Hummer's anxiety became so great he could control it no longer.

"You four stay here," he said, speaking to the men he had brought with him. "Lariat and I will go on up the trail and prospect a little. Don't leave here under any circumstances. If we come on the men, we'll fall back and aid you. But if we should miss them, you can take them in, any way. Don't let them get away!"

Lariat and Hartsook did not take their horses on this little scouting trip, knowing they could retreat with less danger of discovery if on foot.

They had proceeded more than a mile, and were thinking of turning back, when Blinky Jim and Jed Jenkins appeared so suddenly in front of them that retreat was impossible.

They had not been seen, however, and instantly sprawled themselves behind some bushes near which they had been standing.

The moon, which was almost at its full, had recently risen, casting a flood of light over the landscape.

"I believe the guards are drunk," Hartsook whispered, fingering his rifle nervously.

Not only did the moonlight render every movement of the quartette visible, but the quiet of the place caused their words to be heard, as well, though they could not be understood. Had not the soil of the trail beyond been made unusually soft by recent rain, Lariat and Hartsook could not have failed to hear the pounding of the horses' hoofs.

The Hummer's surmise that the guards were in an intoxicated condition was not far from true.

Before leaving the cabin Blinky and Jed had each taken a stiff pull at a bottle of villainous liquor, brought by the former from the Cuckoo's Nest; and they had not proceeded far on the homeward route when its effects began to be most manifest.

They indulged in coarse jests; and Blinky, who had a voice that in its most tuneful hours strongly resembled the noise made by the filing of a hand-saw, poured his swelling heart in song.

To Edith all this was terrifying. She was practically alone with these drunken brutes, for Old Adamant was bound, and powerless to aid her. But in the pocket of her dress she held the little revolver, and was fully determined to use it should necessity demand.

She likewise had some thought of trying to surreptitiously cut Adamant's bonds; but fear for his life as well as her own, should a fight be thus precipitated, kept her from making the attempt.

The intoxication of the men seemed to increase as the time passed, thus increasing her fears; but there was some compensation in the knowledge that the point of ambush was being rapidly approached.

"Oh, if they should not be there!"

Every fiber of her being thrilled at the thought. Miles lay between the point of ambush and the town of Cuckoo. Could she endure them?

Blinky and Jed grew more insulting, more ribald in their songs and jests, as the whisky-fumes mounted more and more to their brains.

The point where Hartsook and Lariat Bill lay in hiding was passed, and they were bearing down on the four men lying in wait for them.

Hartsook and the hostler were in pursuit, coming on as rapidly as possible, yet unable to keep up with the trotting horses.

"We'll have them soon now," was the Hummer's comment, as he panted along, swinging his heavy rifle, and with his blonde hair floating in the wind. "If only those fellows don't fail us. With four in front, and we two here in the rear, they surely can't escape."

He was much disturbed by what he had seen when the guards passed him. He was well acquainted with the hellish humors of drunken men, especially of drunken men such as these.

As the landmark was approached, Edith began to tremble so violently under the thrill of intense excitement that she feared it would be observed.

"Jes' a kiss, my beauty!" Blinky implored, as the rock loomed before them, crowding his horse near to hers and trying to put an arm about her waist.

"Take down that hand!" Edith commanded, sharply. "If you trouble me further, I shall tell my father."

At any other time the threat would have been sufficient, for the scoundrel held Judge Pendergast in much awe. But it fell now on unheeding ears.

"He'p me to hold 'er. Jed. I'm goin' to hev thet kiss, er know why!"

He grasped her dress and drew her toward him; and Jed Jenkins, entering malevolently into the spirit of the dastardly act, urged his horse against hers.

For each of them it was his last act.

Edith gave a scream of terror, and Adamant, helpless as he was, began to shout wildly, and tried to force his horse within reach.

A burst of flame came from behind the rock, four rifles thundered as one, and Blinky Jim and Jed Jenkins tumbled from their saddles—dead.

The horses reared wildly, and the two made riderless dashed away. But Edith, frightened as she was, retained sufficient presence of mind to grasp Adamant's bridle and to hold her own steed, as well.

With loud cries the four men rushed from their hiding-place; and their efforts, added to hers, prevented the attempted stampede.

All this had barely happened, when Hike Hartsook and Lariat Bill raced up almost breathlessly.

Hartsook lifted the half-fainting girl to the ground, while the hostler cut the bonds of Old Adamant.

"You look after her, Adamant," said the Hummer, giving his charge into the keeping of the Man of Rock and turning to the fallen men.

"I'm sorry this happened!" bending over Blinky to see if life was extinct. "I'm opposed to bloodshed on principle, even though I do a little fighting occasionally. I am sorry they were such scoundrels, and sorry that it seemed to become necessary to shoot them. But," and he lifted himself up, his face a trifle paler than usual, "they sowed the wind and have reaped the whirlwind!"

"What air we to do with them?" and Lariat, calloused to such scenes, indicated the prostrate forms.

"We'll leave them there as a warning, and as a notice to a certain individual who is supposed to stand very high in the town of Cuckoo, that he is likely to meet the same fate if he continues in his present course."

He glanced toward Edith to see if she caught his meaning; but she was at the moment conversing with Old Adamant, and had not heard him.

In obedience to the Hummer's orders, the bodies were left as they had fallen, and the return to the town was commenced.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN DURANCE VILE.

THERE is a French proverb that tells us that it is always the unexpected that happens.

When Edith and Adamant had been escorted to the town and the former seen in safety to her home, Hartsook dismissed Lariat Bill and the four men, and made his way up the long street of Cuckoo alone. He was on the alert, not knowing but at any minute he might be attacked as Adamant had been, and fully prepared to defend himself.

Enemies were thickening around him and perils increasing. Yet his gait was as jaunty and airy as ever, the cuckoo-wings had lost not a whit of their rakish look, and as of yore the long blonde hair and slight stature seemed to indicate physical weakness and effeminacy.

He knew that stories of the blackest character had been diligently circulated against himself and Adamant ever since the former's disappearance; and he knew likewise that by many men these stories were beginning to be believed.

A lie well told and stuck to gains hearers where truth would be scorned; and the gambling trio, with Arkansaw Tom, had kept their tongues running.

Judge Pendergast had come out of his stupor sufficiently to do some serious thinking, and had somewhat modified his schemes, as will be seen later.

There had been heavy gaming in the Cuckoo's Nest that night, and the place was not deserted when the Hummer approached it.

Quick looks passed between those present, as Hartsook entered the door.

He paid no heed to these, however, being used to suspicious, and even black looks from many men of the camp. But a feeling of faint surprise came to him as Red Selkirk, the marshal, swaggered in his direction.

"You are my prisoner," declared Selkirk, laying his left hand on Hartsook's shoulder and drawing his revolver with his right.

This was a thing entirely unanticipated by the Hummingbird Hummer. He had feared attack, attempts at assassination, and things of that kind, but had not dreamed of arrest.

"I don't think I understand you," he said, showing a brave front. "There must be a mistake somewhere."

"Nary!" asserted Selkirk, feeling safer as the occupants of the place crowded around. "I know my biz, ever' time! You're my prisoner, I tell ye; an' ye'll come with me er git shot full uv holes!"

"I presume I'm entitled to know what I'm arrested for?" seeing that resistance would be worse than useless.

"K'rect ye air; though I shouldn't think ye'd need to ask. Your pard got wind o' the thing, any way; an' he hed sense enough to skip."

"Again I must say I don't understand you," and a dangerous light came into the blue eyes.

"No; I s'pose not!" with a meaning sneer.

"I'm not used to having my word questioned

even by an officer of the law! Will you tell me what I am arrested for? I have a right to know. If you refuse to tell me, or to show your warrant, I shall refuse to go with you."

The marshal drew from his pocket a legal-looking document.

"There she air!" he cried, a look of exultation on his face. "Ye didn't take me fer a fool, I 'low. Jist run yer peepers over that. If that don't tell ye enough, I'll be happy to explainify!"

The document was a warrant for Hartsook's arrest, drawn up in due form, and signed by Lemuel Pendergast, as police judge. The charges were two: highway robbery in attacking a certain stage, and complicity in the burglarious attempt on the Hummingbird bank.

A painful flush came into Hartsook's fair face.

"It's a pack of lies, Selkirk; and you ought to be well enough acquainted with me to know it!"

Selkirk dropped his hand menacingly to the butt of his revolver.

"Put it easy, pard! Them's ruther hard words you're a-slingin'!"

"I shall go with you, of course!" the threat unheeded. "I'd be a fool not to, when you've got a warrant and a gang like this at your back. But I'd like to have you explainify a little, as you term it. Who preferred these charges, and what did you mean about my pard having skipped?"

Selkirk grinned.

"You'll find out who made the charges in due time. As to the t'other, why, they hain't a man hardly in camp what don't know about it!"

"Word was sent down hyer by the off'cers uv Hummin'bird, sayin' 't they'd found out that the man who'd been sailin' round hyer under the name of Adamant Rock was nobody else but Bozeman Jack, the leader of the road-agents; and that you, Mr. Hartsook, air his right bower."

It was a black and complicated charge, unlooked for and staggering. For a little while the Hummer's ideas were swimming and confused. His mental state was revealed in his mobile features, and led many to think the charges must be true.

His mind worked quickly, trying to grapple with the chain of events leading up to the arrest. It needed but a thought to show that the scheme was a well-laid one, deep and dangerous. There was some officer, perhaps more than one, in the town of Hummingbird friendly to the interests of Judge Pendergast; and this officer, at Pendergast's solicitation, had sent down the lying statement.

This must be so, else Selkirk could not so confidently have asserted the fact; for if proved false, the assertion must react unfavorably on Pendergast and his allies.

"There's been detectives in the country a-ferreting out this whole road-agent business," Selkirk continued, smiling and smiling—for we are told on good authority that a man may smile and smile and be a villain!—his manifestations of pleasure being contagiously imitated by Arkansaw Tom and others.

"And these air the facts they dropped onto. I'm sorry fer ye, Mr. Hartsook; fer the people o' this hyer town don't take kindly to road-agents. P'raps ye kin prove an *allybi*."

The tones were mocking, and showed that he had no such belief.

"It's a lie, as I said!" and Hartsook's face grew white and stern. "But I shall go with you, come what may. I am your prisoner; and as such, I demand fair treatment and protection."

"Old Adamant, my pard as you call him, never skipped out! He is too much of a man, and too honorable to do anything of the kind. No, sir; he was spirited away by a gang of thugs who are pretending, now, that they are a good deal better than some other people."

Selkirk's red face became a shade whiter, and Arkansaw and some of the men in the room, who were familiar with the facts, showed much uneasiness.

"That's the truth, gentlemen! And when the time comes it will be shown to be so. Old Adamant was carried away by a couple of scoundrels, hired to do the dirty work. They would have taken me, too, only that a little mistake was made. But it will all come right, by and by. We can't always have our innings!"

He turned toward the door, where a crowd was gathering and angry words were rising.

A shade of anxiety came into his face.

He knew what that unseemly gathering meant. Judge Pendergast was determined to do his worst, this time.

"I am your prisoner, and demand your protection!" turning from a contemplation of the gathering mob to Red Selkirk. "If it is not given, I have friends here who will make it hot for you!"

"Certainly! Certainly! I'll do all I can fer ye, Mr. Hartsook. But I hain't much of a force an' these men may be too much fer me."

These words of the marshal revealed more than anything else the nature of the plot against Hartsook.

"Up with the road-agent!" came from one of the men in the street.

The Hummer had not been deprived of his weapons. Red Selkirk had been too busy in heaping insult and contumely on his prisoner, and had neglected this most essential thing.

"I shall shoot the first man of that gang that lays hands on me!" drawing and cocking a revolver. "I don't propose to be strung up by a mob without making a fight for it, first. If I have to go, there will be some to bear me company!"

The weapon seemed to threaten the marshal quite as much as any one else, and the Hummer's eyes were bent on him.

Selkirk knew the Hummer had many friends in the camp, and that therefore, he must make a seeming effort to protect his prisoner.

"I'll take ye to the jail!" he said. "What more kin ye ask?"

"To the jail, then, before any more scoundrels have time to collect out there! And we'll go out of here by the back way! The rear entrance isn't guarded, I know."

It was not, and Red Selkirk groaned inwardly at this second oversight.

"Gimme yer gun!" he demanded. "If they see ye wi' that, it'll make 'em wild as wolves."

"I prefer to keep it for a time. When I'm safe in the jail you can have it. I fancy I may need it, now!"

Without waiting for instructions he moved toward the rear of the bar-room.

Selkirk had a wholesome fear of the cocked revolver, and of the Hummer's present temper. Otherwise he would have endeavored to wrest the weapon from his prisoner, and failing in that would have ordered his men to assist. But the prompt action of Hartsook muddled him; for the marshal was not possessed of the clearest brain of any man in the world.

He followed the retreating prisoner, motioning his pals to do likewise.

"I'll have to take 'im to the jail," he whispered to Arkansaw. "Otherwise he'll kill some o' the boys, sure, fer he's got his dander 'way up! But I'll git his gun, when he gits there; an' they kin take the jail."

Arkansaw was not pleased with the programme, but knew of nothing better to suggest, not caring to assume the responsibility as well as the danger of looking after the prisoner.

Selkirk did not stop to hear the reply of the proprietor, feeling anxious lest the prisoner should escape.

Those in front of the saloon, seeing the drift of the maneuver, hurried toward the rear entrance, confident that they could take the prisoner there.

But there were other agencies at work destined to change the perilous drift of events.

News of the Hummer's arrest had reached Lariat Bill; and when the screaming mob streamed from the street toward the rear of the saloon, they were met by a small, but determined party of men, coming from the opposite direction under command of the hostler.

"The fust chap what pushes us too hard, draps!" shouted Lariat, ranging his command into a defensive column, and covering the retreat of the Hummer and Red Selkirk. "An', boys, we mean biz, ever' time! So don't crowd us, if ye wants to be able to take yer drinks reg'lar, to-morrer!"

Cries of rage and hate came from the mob, but which, however, fell back before the threatening weapons of the new-comers.

"Better clean 'em out, anyway, hadn't we?" and the irrepressible hostler turned toward Hartsook. "Give Reddy the shake, an' if ye say the word, we'll mop the street with 'em."

"No!" and Hartsook's tones were firm and commanding. "Don't do any fighting, unless they press you. Then, shoot to hurt. I'm going to jail with this man, and see how much truth there is in the charges that have been trumped up against me. They can't prove anything, and before they get through with it will want to drop it like a hot poker, or I miss my guess!"

"That rotten ole shebang! Why, it wouldn't keep a cat out, if the critter wanted to git in reel bad!"

But Lariat had little time in which to voice protests. The shouts of the mob were becoming louder and more angry with each passing moment. Weapons were also seen to gleam threateningly.

Red Selkirk was not pleased with the present situation. Matters were not turning out as he had planned. Yet, as the representative of the law, he was powerless to change the course of events.

The hostler threw his men as an escort about the marshal and Hartsook, and retreated with all speed toward the jail, which was but a block distant. He feared that any delay might precipitate a fight, which some villain would grasp as an opportunity to shoot the prisoner.

Bearing the reluctant marshal with them, the hostler's men hastened to the jail.

"Jam yer key into that lock, and be quick about it. If ye don't we'll have a muss, yit!"

Selkirk did not like the tone; but he could do no better than obey, and unlocked the door.

As it swung open, Lariat Bill pushed the Hummer into the building and followed with his men.

The jail was untenanted; hence the prisoner

was free to occupy all of it. It was a log affair, with a row of iron cells on one side. Not a very secure place against a howling mob!

"Throw your men out as guards," Hartsook said to the hostler. "They'll be sufficient for the present. Later, if it should become necessary, we can collect more. There are not more than a half-dozen of those fellows out there who are really anxious to get at me. You can recognize them easy enough. They are the ones that are doing the howling. The others might be dangerous, if it should come to a hanging bee and they became mad with excitement."

Selkirk was not pleased with the looks cast on him; and left the place with Lariat's men, locking the ponderous door after them as they went out.

The temper of the mob was cooling somewhat; the streets were being lighted by the rising sun, and your true villain is always afraid of the day.

Lariat Bill addressed them characteristically; and, seeing that they could not now get at the Hummer, they sullenly retired.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE NEW HOSTLER.

THE part taken in the work of the morning by Lariat Bill was particularly distasteful to Judge Pendergast; so distasteful, in truth, that he made it the first business of the day to discharge the hostler from his service.

He had only retained him up to that time, hoping that Miss Mollie Stubbs might thereby be enabled to gain some knowledge of Hartsook's plans, for the Hummer and Lariat Bill had been in the habit of holding occasional consultations in Pendergast's stable.

But nothing had come of this—the hostler being a wary fellow—and the judge decided that Lariat must go.

As matters turned out, he could have done nothing to please the hostler better. So long as he was paid by the judge for performing a given task, he felt it incumbent on him to perform it faithfully; and now every thought and minute ought to be occupied in behalf of the imperiled Hummer. So the dismissal came at a very favorable time, indeed.

This action necessitated the employment of a new hostler.

There were not many men in Cuckoo who cared to accept the position. Its duties were onerous and hard; and the judge was not an employer to be liked. Besides much better wages could be had in the mines and mills. Only Lariat's deep love for horses had led him to seek such employment. This love, with harder service and much less pay, would have tempted him.

But there had come into town that morning a hard-talking individual, with a shock of tow-colored hair and a voice from the Fatherland, who claimed to know all about horses, and who, as soon as he learned of the vacant place, promptly applied for it.

He gave his name as Jacob Schwartz. The judge looked him over keenly when he was ushered into his presence. He saw a stolid, German face, covered with straw-colored beard; gray eyes, kindly and twinkling; a tall, awkward form; and a nose that in its proportions and color seemed decidedly beerish.

"I have some fine horses there. Do you think you can take care of them properly?"

"You pet me! I vhas roond a lifery shtable in New Yorruck vhor more ash ten year," drawing himself up with ludicrous gravity.

"You will have to sleep in the stable and take your meals in the kitchen."

"Dhot vhas all reicht!"

"And I can only give you twenty dollars a month."

"Oh!" and the steel-gray eyes opened surprisedly. "No more ash dhot? Undt peer vhas dwendy cends a schooner, a'ready. A vheller vhill go dhry ash a zucker-vish on dhot!"

"That's all I can give. I gave my last man thirty, but he had been with me a long time. Of course, your board goes in extra."

"Vhell, I musd haf somedings to do. A mans gan't lif' in dhis gountry on vhind. I musd vhint me some vhorok poody quick, vhor I spend me mine last cend dhis mornings. Vhen could I gid some uff dhose breakvasts vhat you speak uff?"

He rubbed his hollow stomach dolefully, as he put the question.

"As soon as you go down to the house. Ask the cook to set you something out, and tell what you're there for, and that I sent you. She'll give you something."

"And, now, there's one other thing I want to mention. I turned off my last hostler only this morning, and for the reason that he didn't know how to attend to his own business. Your work down there will be to take care of my horses. That, and nothing more. He thought there was something else; and that that something else was to spy around and try to find out matters that didn't concern him, and to take part against me in this election business."

"You know that I'm a candidate for police judge?"

A look of the densest ignorance sat on the German's face.

"So hellup me cracious uff I knowt anydbings!"

"Well, I am; and this last hostler thought it smart to join in with the men who are trying to beat me. You will not be such a fool as that? They'll be after you, maybe. If they should, send them about their own business; or better, tell them that you intend to vote for me."

The Dutchman screwed his face into an expression of owlish wisdom, and slowly lifted one eyelid.

"Vhos dhere anydthings creen under dhere? I dhinks me I knows mine pizness petter ash dhot. Uff dhose bollydicians comes vhoolin' around me, I vhill gif dhem a daste uff dhem shoan!"

He lifted an ungainly foot, and gave a kick indicative of the manner in which he would serve them.

The action was altogether so comical that the judge, harassed and weighed down as he was, could not help smiling.

"Be sure you don't forget it as quick as you get out of here! That's the trouble with a good many men. They talk well enough, but they never do anything."

"Ach, mein Gott! You vhas so tifficuld a mans to deal mit!" a hurt expression in the tones. "Dwendy tollar a moont, undt peer dwendy cend a schooner; undt keeb mein moud shudt. I ton'd know uff I vhandt dhe job or not. But dhot br-r-eakfast—"

"I guess you'll do," said the judge, who had no time to look further. "I don't suppose those horses have had anything to eat, this morning. Here's a dollar as advance on your pay, and you can go to work right away."

Cockney Joe was knocking at the door, and he showed the new hostler out with all speed.

The German proceeded directly to the judge's stable, where he busied himself for a time in attending to the wants of the horses. He did not seem in so great a hurry, now, nor nearly so hungry, as when conversing with Pendergast.

"Id vhas a pig dding, dhis pizness!" applying the brush to the coat of the judge's favorite riding animal. "I wouldn't haf misdtid vhor more as a boonert tollar!"

For a moment the features relaxed, the face lost its dull expression, a smile lit up the gray eyes, and even under the false beard and hair was plainly visible the personality of Old Adamant.

The fact will be recalled that he had taken no part that morning in the trouble growing out of the arrest of the Hummer from Hummingbird, although he had come into the town during the night with the Hummer's party of rescuers. He had well-grounded reasons for this, chief of which was a belief that he could serve his own ends better by reappearing in Cuckoo as some one else.

Just now, he was to the world—the uninitiated world of Cuckoo—Jacob Schwartz, the green Dutchman, and the judge's new hostler.

The stoop, which had been largely caused by a heavy pad under the coat, had disappeared from his shoulders. The firm-set jaws and aggressive, resolute chin were hidden beneath the all-concealing, straw-colored beard; and the long, dark hair had been replaced by this tow shock. He was still tall, for length of limb cannot be concealed by the most ingenious disguiser.

When he had leisurely completed the tasks in hand, he proceeded to the kitchen.

"You vhas dhe cook, eh?" presenting himself before Miss Mollie Stubbs. "Dhe snudge, he send me here vhor to gid somedings to ead, I vhas hollow glean to my goat-dails. Uff you hadt a biece uff bie!"

Miss Stubbs stared at him with the frown she usually bestowed on tramps.

"You vhas a hantsome gel?" said the German, a smile lighting his features. "You unt me iss to pe bartners uff dhis estaplishment, hereafter. I vhas dake dhe blace uff dhis Lariat Pill, vhat dhe shudge gif dhe grant pounce avhile aco, already. He sait you would gif me somedings to ead!"

Miss Stubbs's stern features relaxed. It was not often she was called handsome, and flattery was palatable coming even from a man whom she had fancied a tramp.

"A biece uff bie, unt some gake!" continued the German, bowing with hat in hand. "I know 'ad a gel like you vhas been a goot cook. Bie unt gake vhas a vavoride mit me!"

"I'm sorry," and the cock got up and bustled toward the pantry. "But I hain't got anything but bread and butter, now. It's reel good butter, though, and I—I cooked the bread. So, you air the new hostler? Vhen did the jedge turn Lariat off? Take a cheer, do, an' tell me all ab out it. An' vhat di l he turn him off fer?"

"Dbank you!" and Schwartz seated himself very deliberately in the chair she pushed toward him. "I vhas a leedle dired, vhor a vact. I haf' nod peen in dhis lifery shduple pizness vhor more as a year, unt id is hart vhorok."

"But you ain't a-tellin' me 'bout Lariat!" Mollie protested, watching the huge bites as they disappeared.

"Oh, dhot vhellow! Vhell, dbe shudge he say I musd keep me mein moud shud ub dight. But I s'bose dhot vhas no creat z-cret. He durned heem off vhor sbyin', he say; unt me, doo, uff I do dhot."

"I allus said that feller was a spy!" triumphantly. "A reg'lar sneakin' one, too. And did he do anything else?"

"Anodder biece uff preat unt budder, uff you please, miss! I gan dalk petter uff I pe nod guide so hungry."

"Dhank you! You vhas a goot vomans. I say, vhen I vurst seen you: I say to mienselluf; Ach, she vhas a anchels! She vhas cook like a paker-shop, I pet. Unt so id vhas!"

"Dhis mans vhat you inguire so angshious about, he dake pard in a leedle vight dhis mornings. Dhere vhas dhis Hummerpird gid into troubles, I dhink. He vhas arrested, dhis Hummerpird, unt dhis Lariat Pill—ach, dhose names vhas awvull—he raised a crowt uff vel-lows to hellup heem."

"Unt dbe shudge he nod like dhot pizness, unt so he say to heem: Here, you r-rascal, clear oud uff dhis ant gif' an honesd mans a shance. Und dhot vhas me!"

"Um-hm!" rubbing the side of her nose with a floury finger. "And so Lariat Bill's got his walking papers? I knowd he would. I allus said that feller wouldn't come to no good."

"He vhas valk oud unt I vhas valk in!" taking an enormous bite. "Unt so dbe vorlt go rount. Vhe vhas down to-day, unt underneat' to-morrow. Bud vomans, lofely vomans, she vhas a-vlying all dbe dime. Dhere vhas nefer any vlies ondo her, unt no nosgeetoes neidher! I pet me my vaches on dhot."

"I'm afeard you're a flatterer, ain't you?" Miss Stubbs protested.

"Oh, me? I s'bose py dhot you means a mans vhat zay sweet dings to dbe laties. I vash veeling poody goot yooost now, vhor a vact; unt a vellow's dongue vhas limber vhen his sdomach vhas vull. But I vhas no—vhat you call heem—vladderer-r! I vhas a blain sboken mans. Vhen dbe pread vhas pully I haf no more sense as to zay so."

Mollie gave him another piece, liberally spread with the rich, yellow butter.

"Dhank you! Dhank you! Uff I coult vhint me a Cherman gel vhat coult cook like dhot I dhinks me I vould marry her sooner as Christ-mas."

Miss Stubbs blushed.

"I vould, so hellup me! You vhas nod a marrying vomans, eh?"

"Not for the world!" and she threw up her hands.

"Id vhas pad. Meppe you mighd shange your mint on dhot subject, pye unt py?"

"Never!" said Miss Stubbs, firmly. "What! have a lubberly no-account man around me?"

"All dbe Chermans vhas vorkers!" Schwartz insinuated. "Dhey vhas make more money unt safe more money as a richment uff dthese Americans! Dhot vhas dbe troot!"

"Oh, couldn't think of marrying a nobody! I wouldn't have the best man that ever walked. I've had more than a dozen chances, I reckon; but I said 'no' to all of 'em. No marrying fer me. I've seen too much of the world fer that!"

The German scratched his towy head.

"Mein gel in dhe olt gountry zay dhot do me; unt she vend unt marry anodder vhellow in a week, py chiminy!"

"She was a fool!" averred Mollie.

"Dhot vhas vhat I sayd. Vhor uff she hatn't peen she vould haf marriet me. Bud I musd pe going. I likes to talk mit dbe laties; put pizness before exidement, efery dime. Dhot vhas pully goot cooking! Dhank you!"

And, with this parting salute, he returned to the stable.

He had gained his purpose. Mollie could not resist flattery, and henceforth the loud-talking German would stand high in her esteem.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CAUGHT.

"I AM 'most afraid we're watched!"

Betty Blessington and Lariat Bill were walking in the little grove a few hundred yards north of the Cuckoo's Nest. It was called "the Park," for in this, as in other things, the town of Cuckoo strove to be metropolitan.

Betty glanced anxiously backward through the gathering dusk in the direction of Arkansaw Tom's establishment.

She still held her position as bar-maid of the Nest, notwithstanding her late escapade. At Pendergast's advice, nothing had been said to her on the subject. She had expected a quick dismissal; but it had not come, and so she had remained.

Pendergast's object in this was the same as that which had induced him to retain Lariat Bill. He felt that she was allied in some way with Old Adamant, and that a close watch on her movements might bring revelations of importance.

Betty knew she was continually shadowed; hence, had refused to hold any further discussions of matters of business with Lariat Bill in the bar-room.

"Let 'em watch, if it'll do 'em any good!" said the hostler, contemptuously.

He had been irritated by the events of the day. The arrest of Hartsook, that morning, and the subsequent excitement, had kept his nerves strained to the breaking point.

"Let 'em watch! They can't hear nothin'; and that's the p'tic'lar p'int."

"As I was saying," and Betty took up the conversation at the point where it had been interrupted by her exclamation, "when they found out that I'd been hid in the closet, they nailed up the trap-door leading through the floor. I was scared, I tell you, for a little while! But as they didn't say anything, and acted as if they didn't know anything, I went right on with my spying."

"If they da'st to so much as lay a finger on you, I'll pulverize the hull outfit!" and the hostler drew himself up and looked quite fierce and threatening.

Betty laughed.

"Don't go to hurting anybody on my account, Mr. Jackson. I fancy I can fight my own battles."

"But I've sworn to fight 'em for ye!" with a languishing sidelong glance in Betty's direction. "Through life, I have; an' dinged if I don't do it ever 'chance I git!"

"But you mustn't go a-hunting up worlds to conquer, Mr. Jackson. It'll be time when they come to you."

"But you didn't let me finish my story! After they'd nailed up the trap-door, they seemed to take particular pains to let me know when they were going to have another meeting there. I s'pose maybe they thought I'd be fool enough not to know they'd found out about my being there, and that I'd go in there again."

"A sort o' walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly!"

"Just so! But the fly didn't accept the spider's invite that time. Spiders aren't extry smart, and flies aren't always fools. I didn't walk into the parlor; but I done something else I know they wasn't looking for, and which they haven't found out, yet."

Lariat Bill bent his head interestedly.

"You know there is a kind of garret above the second story of the house. Or, if you don't know, I'll tell you: there is. It's over the corridors and all the rooms. It's a place for old clothes and traps of all kinds, and they don't hardly ever anybody go up there. I guess there ain't very many besides Arkansaw Tom and a few others that know there is such a place."

"I never heard of it!" the hostler observed.

"I 'most knew you hadn't. I only found it out myself as you may say by accident."

"Well," with a pleased chuckle, "I had the Hummer slip up there one night and saw out a hole above the corridor that leads to Pendergast's room. The square of boards that he took out he made into a little door with the joints so nicely concealed that no one would ever suspect it. If you should go into that corridor and look for it, I doubt if you could find it, even after I've told you. You recollect the corridor has a plank ceiling; otherwise we couldn't have worked it so nice."

"When he got it all fixed, I had him bring me a light rope ladder."

"And every night since, when Pendergast and his friends have had a meeting, I've gone up into that garret, have let myself down through that hole by the ladder, and have managed to hear everything that's been said."

"I've seen a good deal, too, for they never thought to close the keyhole."

"I could always tell when the meeting was going to break up; and got back to the garret, drew up the rope-ladder, and had the trap-door in place before they came out."

"You're a brick, Betty!" and the hostler bobbed his head in solemn emphasis. "I never see a gal to ekal ye. You ought to go into the detective line fer a reg'lar biz."

"Maybe I am!" and the bar-maid looked up archly.

"But supposin' some one was to come into that corridor an' ketch ye 'fore ye had time to climb out?"

"No one has ever done it, yet. The corridor is a long one, and the stairs are not very short. As soon as any one sets foot on the stairway I can hear it."

"An' then ye go up that ladder jist like a monkey!"

"Yes, I do. You don't know how I can climb, Mr. Jackson. Not like a monkey—I don't like monkeys—but like a sailor!"

"Well, ye don't want to let any one ketch ye!" as they turned on their homeward walk.

"I'll be careful, Mr. Jackson! And—I'll climb!"

They were scarcely hidden by the trees when a crafty, sinister face peered among some branches above the path they had been traversing. It was the face of Arkansaw Tom; and it was filled with exultant malignity.

"I jist hopes you'll try that ag'in, my gal!" looking in the direction whence they had gone. "You'll climb, will ye? I'll crack yer neck when I ketch ye at it!"

"An' you're in the detective bizness, eh? A-helpin' of Ole Adamant and Hummer? An' the Hummer's been a-playin' carpenter, an' cuttin' up my house, 'thout so much as sayin' by yer leave! Oh, you're a fine lot! An' that air Lariat Bill's as bad as the next 'un!"

"But it's a long lane what hain't got no turn-in' p'int, an' the pitcher what goes often to the

well is bound to git broke at last. An' so it'll be with you, an' these hyer frien's o' yours. I ought to 'a' packed you out o' my place long ago, an' would but fer the jedge. An' this is what's come o' it?"

"Jist try it ag'in, though, an' see who comes out ahead. Jist try it, my gal; jist try it!"

Fierce vindictiveness spoke in his voice, and lay revealed in his darkly-working features. If he should succeed in catching Betty Blessington spying in the corridor, after the manner she had described to Lariat Bill, he would be likely to show her little mercy and less consideration.

Fortunately for Betty's present peace of mind she was all unaware of the fact that her words had been overheard.

With the hostler she continued on to the Cuckoo's Nest; and when Arkansaw Tom came in, ten minutes or more later, she was behind the bar, as smiling and innocent looking as ever.

"Oh, you minx!" the proprietor gritted, soliloquizingly. "Oh, you sneakin' pussy-cat! Oh, you she-devil! Jist go on with your spyin' an' peekin'! We'll see who comes out ahead. Climb, will ye? I'll make you wisht you'd been borned without feet!"

So terrible was his malevolent rage that he found great difficulty in restraining its expression in his face. But he crowded it back, though the effort almost choked him, and went about the tasks of the evening as usual.

When Pendergast came in, which was shortly before midnight, he drew him to one side, being particularly careful that no one was near to hear what he had to say, and told of his discovery in the grove.

The judge was as much surprised and angered, as well as alarmed, as the proprietor had been.

"We'll have to put a stop to that! Heavens! has Adamant and the Hummer been hearing of all our plans as fast as we've made them?"

The sweat came out on his forehead in great drops.

"It looks like it!" Arkansaw confessed.

"We can never do anything, if our plans are to be known in that way! We must put a stop to it."

Betty watched them as they talked, thinking they were arranging for another conference in Pendergast's room.

She saw the judge approach and speak to the gamblers, Cockney Joe, Silk-Hat Sid, and Sam Turnbull, and then she felt sure of the truth of her inference.

As usual in these conferences, the judge and his friends did not ascend to the room until the hour had grown extremely late, and almost the last loiterer had wended his way homeward.

The last man left the place some ten minutes after the judge had disappeared.

"Ye needn't wait to shet up the place!" said Arkansaw, with affected kindness. "I'll 'tend to that, directly. Ye must be purty well wore out."

Even then, so like at other times had matters progressed, Betty felt no premonition of danger.

When Arkansaw had gone to the further end of the room to look after some work there, she slipped on her bonnet and retreated up the stairway, as if intending to go to her own apartment.

Instead, she changed her course as soon as out of view of any one in the bar-room, and bent her steps toward the unused stairway leading to the garret.

On the way, she drew the rope-ladder from beneath a pile of old lumber and coiled it in a roll beneath her apron.

Then, with cautious and cat-like footsteps, she crept up the shaky stairs and into the gloomy place above. Being perfectly familiar with the route, though, she had no fears of falling or making any unusual noise by stumbling against some obstacle. The garret was so isolated from the living rooms, too, that sounds did not readily penetrate from it to them.

She fancied the conference must be well under way by this time, and perhaps some things of great interest to her friends under discussion, and so she hurried along as rapidly as possible.

The trap-door was reached and the ladder descended in safety. Sounds of voices in subdued conversation came from the judge's room. Cautiously she tip-toed to the door and applied an eye to the key-hole.

The gamblers were deep in the mysteries of a game of cards.

For ten minutes Betty watched and listened, without hearing anything that could be of the least benefit to her.

Then, her keen ears caught a sound which came not from the room into which she had been peering. A mysterious sound, the direction or cause of which she was at a loss to conjecture.

But she was not left long in doubt. The garret floor, with the ladder dangling from the hole in it, was but a short distance away.

Toward this she glanced, in her search for the origin of the strange sound.

The head and shoulders of a man were thrust through the opening, and the man, who was none other than Arkansaw Tom, was glowering at her with the vindictiveness of deadly hate.

As her gaze fell on this startling sight, she

rose to her feet, while an involuntary cry of alarm escaped her lips.

But she was not quick enough to avoid the noose which Arkansaw hurled at the same moment, and with an aim as true as was ever shown by the rope king.

Like a great, circling, hissing serpent, the lasso swooped down, the noose dropping over her neck and shoulders. Arkansaw's brawny arm flew backward, and Betty Blessington, choking and gasping, was hurled to the floor.

The gamblers within the room, who had been patiently waiting for this most welcome *denouement*, hurried out, Pendergast at their head.

As soon as he was certain he had snared and thrown down the spy, the proprietor of the Cuckoo's Nest scrambled nimbly down the rope ladder and reached the girl's side almost as soon as did the men from the room.

"Aha! We've got her!" he cried, showing his teeth in an exultant and wolfish grin. "We've ketched the she-cat this time, and don't you fergit it!"

Betty tried to sit up, and the judge, noticing her efforts, loosened the cruel rope.

The bar-maid looked at the circle of angry faces, and whitened to the hue of death.

"What do you mean to do with me?" she faltered, as soon as she could regain her voice.

"Do? Why, we're jist natcherly a-goin' to murder ye!" exclaimed the cruel voice of Arkansaw. "That's what we're a-goin' to do. You won't be a-spyin' on us any more, my fine lady."

There was no sympathy for her visible in any of the faces.

"Take her into the room!" Pendergast commanded, harshly.

She did not endeavor to resist, but at the order of Arkansaw walked into the judge's apartment.

"Now," and the judge's white mustache trembled with the violence of his emotions, "you must tell us who set you at this work. If you refuse, I shall not be responsible for what befalls you. Answer truthfully, and you may go from here unharmed."

The girl's hands were clasped and there was no color in the cheeks usually so rosy, but she returned his gaze with one as defiant as his was threatening.

"Speak up!" he said.

"I won't!"

And, though they threatened and cajoled by turns, she steadily stuck to her determination to maintain silence.

Base as they were, they had not sufficient cruelty in their natures to strike or maltreat her—a thing to be ever remembered to their credit—and finally, finding they could gain no information from her, they thrust her from the room.

"Go!" ordered Arkansaw. "An' never ye darken my doer ag'in!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SWIFT EXCHANGE.

THRUST out of the Cuckoo's Nest, Betty Blessington knew not at first what course to pursue. She stood on the street, humiliated, chagrined, lost and bewildered. There was no one in sight, though behind her she could hear the voices of the gamblers, they having followed her down the stairway into the bar-room.

She felt that she must find refuge of some kind, for her head was throbbing fiercely and she needed rest.

At length she turned in the direction of Judge Pendergast's residence, determined to see Edith and relate to her all that had occurred.

Mollie Stubbs, grumbling and half asleep, responded to her rap on the door.

She looked down at Betty, curiously.

"Can I see Miss Pendergast?" Betty inquired.

Miss Stubbs was not pleased at being thus roused from her morning nap, and besides had no very high opinion of the Cuckoo bar-maid.

"What did you say, mum?" superciliously pretending she did not understand the question Betty repeated it.

"I s'pose ye kin, mum, if you'll wait."

With that she closed the door in Betty's face, and shuffled languidly toward Edith's sleeping apartment.

Edith was not so curt and dilatory.

"Show her into the parlor at once," she commanded. "Why did you leave her standing out there on the steps?"

Mollie obeyed, but with much bad grace; tarrying in the parlor to light the lamp, knowing it would not be the part of wisdom to neglect so important a duty.

It did not take Edith long to dress and descend to where Betty Blessington was in waiting.

"Why, how pale you look, and how worn out!" for she had known Betty for some time and conversed with her on several occasions.

Betty burst into tears, being unable to further restrain her long-pent-up grief.

"My dear, what is it?" and Edith passed an arm affectionately about the sobbing girl.

The storm of sobs passed quickly, and then Betty told her story.

"Go to my room. You shall stay here."

As she uttered the words, she heard the judge's footsteps on the gravel walk.

"Go!" she implored. "Go! He may have followed you. I will meet him and stand between you and his wrath. Never fear; but go!"

She hurried her into the hall and in the direction of the sleeping room; then turned back to meet Pendergast.

As she feared, he was in a towering rage.

"Where is that girl?" he demanded. "The bar-maid? I saw her come here. You are not giving her shelter?"

"Not shelter, merely," and she firmly met his angry glance, "but a home, if she chooses to make one here."

The judge's eyes flashed and his thin form shook.

"You forget yourself, Edith! Do you know what that woman is?"

"I know she is a woman and in need of help and sympathy! What more is it necessary for me to know?"

Pendergast noticed that she no longer called him father, having dropped that term of affection some time before. The knowledge did not reassure him or tend to place him at his ease.

"She is a spy!" he said, placing bitter emphasis on the words. "And I will not have a spy in my house."

"A man whose deeds are upright and just can have no fear of even a spy!" Edith declared, scornfully.

"Do you mean that as personal?" his white face transformed into the semblance of a fiend's by his intense wrath.

"I said nothing of the kind. We will not quarrel. Let the girl alone. She can do no one harm here."

"I won't have a spy in my house!" he declared again, with even greater heat. "She must leave here, I tell you. Leave this minute. With your consent or not, she can't remain here."

"You have had a spy in the house for lo! these many weeks!" speaking with slow and irritating deliberation. "And it has not been without your knowledge. And at your solicitation she has been dogging my footsteps and following me about like my shadow!"

"It's a lie!" determined to brave it out, and knowing what was coming. "I say it is a lie!"

"It's the truth, Judge Pendergast. And you know it to be the truth. What has Mollie Stubbs become but a spy on me? And who told her to follow me about but you?"

"It's a lie!" he repeated. "An infernal, black lie! Go to your room! I will not have you speaking to me in such a strain. And, while you're there, you may pack your things, for that girl goes out of this house, if you have to go with her."

"Do you really mean it?" she asked. "Beware Judge Pendergast. You may go a step too far!"

Pendergast, remembering Mollie's report of the conversation between Edith and the Hummingbird Hummer, felt that he had really gone too far.

"Tut, tut!" he exclaimed. "What's the use of our quarreling? It is disgraceful! But you oughtn't to go against my wishes in this way, Edith! You ought not, truly! You owe me some measure of obedience, yet, even if you care nothing for me."

He made the statement in half-fearful tones, not knowing but the next moment she would charge him with deception in the matter of her parentage. But she did not.

"We will not quarrel!" she asserted. "As you say, it is disgraceful. But there's two things you may understand, now: Miss Blessington remains with me as long as she chooses to do so; and Mollie Stubbs leaves this place just as soon as it is light enough for her to travel."

He knew she was determined to have her way and that further controversy would only precipitate a most disagreeable question—the question of their relationship.

Realizing what this portended he muttered an oath, jammed his hat angrily down over his eyes, and abruptly left the house.

Edith went immediately to her own room, where for more than an hour she sat talking with the distressed bar-maid, the two mingling their tears.

At the end of that time she descended to the kitchen.

"I shall not want you any longer, Mollie," she said. "Here is your pay. Miss Betty Blessington takes your place this morning."

And Miss Stubbs, thus rudely dismissed, fled to Judge Pendergast for counsel and protection, and was made bar-maid of the Cuckoo's Nest.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NOT EASILY DUPED.

LARIAT BILL'S anxiety was so great concerning the safety of the Hummer, now incarcerated in the Cuckoo jail, that he scarcely allowed himself time for needed rest. All through the night, after his talk with Betty Blessington, he remained secreted within a stone's throw of the jail, watching and waiting for any movement of Hartsook's enemies.

The feeling in the camp was most intense, the

adherents of Hartsook and of Pendergast going constantly armed. There was also much bitter talk, and a collision seemed possible at any time. Lariat Bill, listening to and watching everything, felt that it was the calm before the storm.

He learned of the change of bar-maids, next day, and of the causes that led to it; and was extremely anxious to have a talk with Betty, which, however, he could not well arrange. It was Old Adamant who sent him the news.

The new hostler was as much surprised as any one at the sudden change in the cooks, and at first felt that his efforts at gaining the good-will of Miss Stubbs had been wasted. But the change brought ample compensation.

He had succeeded in revealing his identity to Edith, and had had a long conversation with her while Miss Stubbs was sleeping the sleep of the beautiful in her little bedroom back of the kitchen.

The coming of Betty Blessington was, therefore, a rather favorable turn of events. From her he had nothing to fear. Seemingly, Judge Pendergast's enemies had taken possession of his house.

The following night, Lariat Bill took his position near the jail. The talk that day had been eved wilder and more threatening than at any time previous. Judge Pendergast, he knew, was diligently laying plans to compass Hartsook's destruction. What those plans were, though, he did not know. This made him nervous and uneasy; for the danger that threatens, if we know not from whence it is to come, is the most terrible of all dangers.

There were loud-talking crowds gathered in front of the Cuckoo's Nest, some favorable to Hartsook and some opposed to him; and these Lariat Bill watched unceasingly.

They scattered, however, as the night advanced; and he turned his attention exclusively to the jail.

As he watched, he fancied he saw one of the heavy wooden shutters move slightly. The wind was piping briskly at the time. But why had the shutter moved? To his mind there could be but one answer: the jail guard had inadvertently left it loose.

He crept closer to make sure he had seen aright. The shadows of some trees near by moved ghost-like over the face of the logs. It might have been these that had caught his eye instead of the movement of the shutter.

He crouched in the grass and stared hard at the window.

There could be no doubt about it this time. The shutter had not been fastened that night, and the wind was moving it.

He looked about the grassy yard, then in the direction of the town, to be sure there was no one in sight. All was deserted. The hour was late, too; and no doubt the jailer had long since retired and was sleeping in fancied security.

He crawled up to the window, drew himself erect and took hold of the heavy shutter. It moved readily beneath his touch. He pulled it open. Between him and the interior of the jail there was nothing, the shutter having been the only bar.

He looked in, but owing to the gloom could obtain no view of the inside. He knew, however, that Hartsook was not confined in one of the cells.

At first, he thought of calling softly, but feared that might be too risky. The jailer might not have fallen asleep yet.

He climbed up to the window and through the opening, every sense alert, and ready to fight or fly, as occasion demanded. His shoes he had left on the ground outside.

Dropping lightly to the floor, he moved toward the center of the large room; then crouching, and subduing his voice to the merest whisper, called the Hummer's name.

An answer came immediately.

Hartsook had been lying on his pallet of straw, half asleep.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"It's me!" and Lariat Bill crept cautiously toward him.

"But who is 'me'?" and the ex-hostler saw the dull gleam of a revolver, and heard the weapon's low "click, click!"

Lariat Bill had been so cautious in speaking the words, that the Hummer had not recognized his voice.

The Hummer from Hummingbird had succeeded in retaining one of his pistols. Not the big, cannon-like affair he sometimes wore belted to his waist, but a small weapon which he had hidden in an inner pocket. He feared treachery, and was not willing to part with every means of defense.

Halted by the suggestive "click, click," Lariat Bill lifted his voice a little and informed Hartsook who he was.

The latter was much surprised to find him there.

"I 'low you didn't know the winder was open," creeping silently to Hartsook's side. "It is, though, and I've come to tell ye. The guard forgot to fasten it proper, and the wind shook the bar loose."

The Hummer gave utterance to a low, musical laugh.

"Fooled ye, did they?"

He could not discern the stare with which the question was greeted.

"Lariat, I've known that window was open for more than two hours!"

The hostler gasped his surprise.

"An' you didn't try to git out?"

"It's just a trap, Lariat, and I'm much afraid you've put your foot in it."

He looked in the direction of the window, where a patch of star-gemmed sky showed the shutter to be slightly ajar.

"No jailer with his five senses about him would ever neglect a thing like that. To do so, should it become known, would cost him his position."

Lariat Bill began to feel somewhat foolish, as the truth dawned upon him.

"You've been watching things pretty closely outside?"

"Hain't been a leaf moved but I've seen it."

"And you've been there all evening?"

The hostler replied affirmatively.

"Well, just as sure as your name's Jackson, and mine isn't the Hummer from Hummingbird, there have been things happened out there to-night that you didn't see!"

"I didn't see it either, but I'm just as sure of it as if I had. One don't always need eyes to make discoveries. I'm shut in here like the fish in the Mammoth Cave; and like them, have to find out things without seeing, if I find them out at all."

Lariat Bill had uttered an exclamation of incredulity. He felt sure that no movement had occurred in or around the jail-yard.

The Hummer could not see the puzzled look on his face, but he perfectly understood his feelings.

"You doubt it, eh? Then let me tell you: There are men lying out there in the shadows; men with Winchesters in their hands. It may be they have revolvers instead of Winchesters. On that point I'm not sure; but I incline to a belief in the Winchesters."

"Neither can I tell just when they came. It may have been before you did, or after. But they are there."

"The jailer knows all about it. I also think that Pendergast and his genial friends know all about it. The jailer is probably working under Pendergast's instructions; and it is equally probable that Pendergast or Arkansaw Tom had those men hide out there."

"It was not by accident that the jailer left the window open. He did it for a purpose. He knew I would see it; and thought I would attempt to make my escape. And that when I went to climb out, the men would down me with their guns."

"It's a neat little trick, Lariat, very neat. I'm not surprised that you were fooled by it. If I hadn't had some previous experience along that line, I might have been fooled, too."

The hostler uttered a subdued snort of disgust. His zeal had outrun his discretion and led him into peril.

"It don't seem that it kin be so," he protested. "I thought I was keepin' my eyes an' years both wide open."

"I'm sorry you came in. Of course you'll have to go out again. You'll see, though, that I can't go with you. They may shoot at you, thinking it's me. Then, again, they may not, for they must have seen you when you crawled in. They may think it best to hold their fire, believing that I'll follow in a minute or so."

The prospect of being made a target of was not a pleasant one.

"Besides, I'm not sure that I want to get out of here, just yet. That is, I mean I don't know that I want to sneak out. I might have to leave the town if I did, and I can't afford to do that for a while. I've got too much work to do here. They can't prove these charges against me, and will be bound to release me in a day or two."

For a half-hour or more the hostler remained in the jail in conversation with Hartsook.

Then he approached the window and cautiously looked out. In vain he scanned the surroundings. He could see nothing of the men whom the Hummer asserted to be there.

"I believe you're off!" he declared, mounting to the window-sill. "Any way, hyer goes!"

He pushed the shutter open and dropped lightly to the ground.

Remembering the Hummer's caution, as soon as his feet touched the earth he threw himself prone on his face.

The movement was not made too quickly. There came a volley of rifle-shots, the balls screaming over his head and burying themselves in the logs. The men in hiding had not been able to tell whether the form they saw was that of Lariat Bill returning or of the Hummer escaping. Being unwilling to take any risks, they had fired.

With much nimbleness, the hostler scrambled to his feet and made off, running in a zigzag line to baffle the aim of the would-be assassins, which at the best could not be very good because of the darkness and the swaying shadows.

Hartsook listened intently and anxiously to the vanishing patter of the hostler's feet, fearing to hear him fall, and wondering if he had been hit.

He was quickly reassured.

Lariat Bill having run the deadly gantlet, uttered a shout, which was both a call of comfort to his friend, and a note of defiance to his foes.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE HUMMER "RESCUED."

As Hartsook had surmised, the would-be assassins lying in wait for him had been sent there by Judge Pendergast, and with the full knowledge of the jailer, who was a creature of Red Selkirk's.

The failure of his scheme to lure the Hummer to his death, irritated the judge beyond measure; and he immediately began to lay other plans to compass that end.

He had sent Cockney Joe with instructions to Blinky Jim and Jed Jenkins concerning Old Adamant. The first draft he missed from his pocket. What had become of it, he could not tell; and this had occasioned him much uneasiness. But he felt that he could not turn back. So a second map had been prepared and other instructions, and with these the Englishman had set out.

He found the men he was seeking dead in the trail, and had returned with the startling news.

At this, Pendergast had himself set out over the trail for the purpose of visiting the cabin. The guards were certainly dead, and the cabin was deserted.

A baffling mystery was thus presented; but of one thing he was sure: Old Adamant had made his escape. What had become of him, or where he had fled to was not so clear; and this uncertainty weighed heavily on his mind.

The failure of his plot against Hartsook did not dishearten him, however, for he was fertile of resources. The same night he made a trip into the mountains, and, in the disguise of Captain Playfair, visited Bozeman Jack.

The latter was still subservient to his master's wishes, though the failure of the attack on the Hummingbird bank had somewhat soured him.

"We will have to help our friends in Cuckoo again," he said, to the road-agent leader, when they were out of ear-shot of the band. "It is through them that I am able to keep so well posted in regard to the movements of gold-dust along the trail, and of the coming and going of the detectives. We'd have to shut up shop without them; and of course we must expect to make some payment in return."

"Not another Hummin'bird lay, I hope!" Bozeman growled.

"Nothing of the kind," reassuringly. "It has some points of resemblance, though the danger will be but slight. In fact, there won't be any danger at all."

The road-agent remained silent, awaiting the development of the plan.

"You've heard of Hike Hartsook, the Hummer of Hummingbird, as he calls himself? And you know how bitterly he and Old Adamant have been fighting Judge Pendergast! They've got Hartsook in jail now, and you're to rescue him."

Bozeman stared.

"You don't savvy, eh? I'll try to make it clear to you. The story has been pretty well circulated down there, that Old Adamant is Bozeman Jack, the road-agent—a gentleman you're acquainted with—and that Hartsook is his lieutenant."

He laughed lightly under his mask.

"What more natural thing in the world, then, than that Bozeman Jack and his men should try to take Hartsook out of the jail and bear him away with them—away where mobs do not congregate, nor thieves get into trouble?"

"And that's the work I've cut out for you to do."

"You are to 'rescue' him—and then treat him as you would a rattlesnake."

At first Bozeman Jack protested strongly against taking any further part in what he called a "political row." But Playfair's patience and powers of persuasion were seemingly limitless. The talk lasted an hour, at the end of which time Playfair took his departure, his mission accomplished.

The next night Bozeman descended from the hills with his outlaw band.

His coming was anticipated by Pendergast. That astute gentleman never let the grass grow under his feet when he had a piece of important work in hand; and this was to him most important work, indeed.

With Arkansas's aid, and the aid of his gambling confederates, he had circulated through the camp the report that in some mysterious way word had been received that an attempt would be made that night by the road-agents to rescue their comrade then confined in the Cuckoo jail.

By many the story was not believed. Many knew it to be false. But the major portion of the town was ready to receive and credit any bit of derogatory gossip no matter how it reflected on or injured. It is the habit of gossip-mongers everywhere. The viler the morsel the greater the gusto with which they roll it under their tongues.

Old Adamant and the hostler knew of the circulation of these damaging stories. But Old

Adamant was not yet ready to show his hand; and Lariat Bill could do little to counteract them. But he did what he could; and was aided by the numerous friends of the Hummer in the town.

Lariat Bill scouted the idea that any road-agents would come into the town for the purpose of taking Hartsook from the jail, thinking the whole thing a pure fabrication gotten up by Pendergast for the sole purpose of creating prejudice against the prisoner.

Yet, as on all occasions since the Hummer's incarceration, he kept a sharp watch for treachery, come from what direction it might. And that night, as on the nights preceding, he held his long vigil in the shadows not far from the jail.

The dawn was scarcely an hour distant when Bozeman Jack and his men rode into the camp. They were disguised, and well-armed and well-mounted. The road-agent chief had not forgotten his bitter experience at Hummingbird, and proposed to be ready for any emergency.

He did not fancy the task assigned him; and a week before would have refused utterly to undertake it. But the sharp talk given him by Pendergast in the guise of Playfair, as related in a previous chapter, had tended to make him more subservient to the wishes of his chief.

Besides, acting under the instructions of the mysterious Playfair, he had but a few days before made a splendid haul of dust from one of the stages; and consequently he and his men were feeling much better toward their director. He could not get along without the brains of his chief to guide, and he knew it.

Lariat Bill heard the pounding of the horses' hoofs; and, scenting danger, craned his neck and peered into the gloom from whence the sounds came.

When too late, he realized that there had been more than mere assertion in the reports which had been set flying through the town that day.

He drew his weapons, gave a yell to call friends to his aid, and started toward the entrance of the jail, determined to defend his friend to the last ditch, and if necessary die with him.

But he had not taken a dozen steps when he fell to the earth. A rope had been cunningly stretched across his line of flight, by some men who had been concealed there for the purpose, and the hostler was rendered helpless to aid or to fight in this crisis.

The men holding the ends of the rope pounced on him before he could struggle to his feet, and securely tied him, thrusting at the same time a cloth gag into his mouth.

The maddened hostler fought like a trapped lion, but he was in the toils, and all his efforts could do him no good.

In the mean time, the road-agents, at the command of their masked chief—all were masked, as they had been at Hummingbird—rapped loudly on the door of the jail.

The jailer came, ostensibly to see what was wanted and who was there. He knew well enough, however, and this movement was but a blind. From the first he had been in Pendergast's secret, receiving his instructions from Red Selkirk, Pendergast's friend and ally.

"Wot do ye want?" he growled, poking his head out at the half-open door.

For reply he was seized by one of the road-agents and dragged through the doorway and into the street, where he raved and threatened in a most contumacious way.

Through the open door the road-agents streamed. As soon as within the building they lighted one of the lamps. By its light they saw the Hummer, half-reclining on his pallet of straw. He was looking at them earnestly, but had drawn no weapon.

"We'll have ye out o' hyer in a jiffy!" announced the leader of the mob that entered.

"We're frien's, we air; an' we've come to git ye out o' hyer."

The Hummer was not in the least deceived by these assurances. He knew who they were. One of the voices struck him familiarly. He had heard it before, and knew it belonged to one of Bozeman's men.

Yet he did not think it the part of wisdom to offer resistance. He might have killed one or two of the scoundrels who were crowding on him. But the end would have been the same. He would have been taken; and with their deaths to answer for he could expect little consideration or mercy at their hands.

Hence, he had not drawn his revolver. He did not wish them to know, either, that he had any weapon, for that would be but to force its surrender; and thus he would be left entirely defenseless.

"You are lying about this thing!" he declared, looking at them sternly. "But I'll go with you—for the very good reason that you leave me no choice in the matter. I know you! You are Bozeman's men."

"In course we air, pard," the spokesman persisted. "An' so is you. You hain't fergot us so quick, I reckon. We is come to git you out o' hyer. An' we hain't got long fer to stay, neither. The hull blame town's a-wakin' up; an' they'll be a-bilin' after us lack bad hornets, d'reckly!"

The Hummer would have talked for delay,

only that his first effort in that line was promptly sat down on. And seeing that argument was useless, as he had already decided resistance would be suicidal, he suffered himself to be led from the jail.

Men were gathering from every direction. Some called by the warning cry of Lariat Bill, but more drawn there through curiosity. The largest number came, however, at the request of Pendergast's allies, to be eye-witnesses of the truth of the assertions made that day. If they, with their own eyes, caught a glimpse of the rescuing party, it would be hard for the Hummer's friends to assert that he was not one of Bozeman's men.

A fight seemed imminent, at one time. But the fighting leader, Lariat Bill, did not appear to direct the attack, and the men who would have made a good struggle under his guidance, fell back and dispersed for the lack of it.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A DARING PURSUIT.

As soon as Bozeman Jack and his men had vanished with the Hummer in their midst, those who had held Lariat Bill bound and gagged, abandoned him. Left thus alone it did not take the hostler long to wriggle out of his bonds and remove the gag.

His rage was deep and terrible. But storming did no good, and being unable to tackle the men who had carried away Hartsook, he went in search of Old Adamant.

He found him, in the guise of Jacob Schwartz, standing on the street near the Cuckoo's Nest, his hands thrust deeply into his trousers pockets, and staring owlishly at the excited crowd.

Lariat Bill brushed rudely against him to attract his attention; and the Dutchman, seeming not to have noticed it, sauntered slowly in the direction taken by Lariat.

He overtook the hostler in the shadow of some buildings, a square away.

"Ach!" he cried, as if he had stumbled on the hostler by accident. "Dhere vhas a lod uff grazzy whellows rooning rount here to-night. Id bead dhe vorlt vhat vools some mens make by dhemselves!"

"He's gone!" Lariat whispered. "The Hummer! The road-agents carried him away!"

Old Adamant looked carefully about before replying. It would never do at this time, he felt, to have his disguise penetrated. To be seen talking to the hostler would be to upset many of his plans. He had ingratiated himself with Pendergast and his ilk, and was supposed to be friendly to their interests. In his bluff, loud way, he had even done some talking in their behalf. He felt that could he continue the deception he was in a fair way to discover some of the judge's most important secrets.

"I know it," he said, sinking his voice until the words were almost indistinguishable. "I know all about it. Pendergast has got ahead of us to-night. I didn't think there was anything in their stories this afternoon, or I should have found some means to beat them. But there's no use crying over spilt milk."

There's work for you to do, Lariat. Big work; and it must be done at once. These fellows can't be far from town, yet. Follow them. You haven't time to gather a crowd; and you can do better work by yourself, anyway, than with a lot of men at your heels.

"Fighting wouldn't be of much use. Cunning and craft is what is needed. You have lots of that. Go, and may God bless you! I know you can bring the Hummer back."

He thrust his hands into his pockets, reassumed his slouching attitude, and shuffled on up the street; while Lariat Bill, fired by new ideas and new hopes, crept away in the opposite direction.

Within ten minutes thereafter, the devoted fellow was out of town and on the trail of Bozeman's retreating men. He was on foot, too, deeming it unwise to take a horse.

But in work of this kind he scarcely needed a horse. He had had severe training as a trailer on the plains and in the mountains; had learned of Indian runners, the long, tireless, loping gait; and by experience knew how to husband his strength.

He kept his ears strained to catch the faintest sound; and, aided by the scant moonlight, narrowly watched each side of the beaten road leading to the mountains.

Two miles out of town he saw where the hoof-marks of Bozeman's horses cut the fresh sod, and turned at right angles to the beaten path.

He hesitated here for a short time, half fearing there might be men lying in ambush in anticipation of such a pursuit. He satisfied himself by a detour, however, that this was not the case, and again pressed on.

Bozeman Jack had changed the position of his stronghold twice since the unlucky time when the hostler had fallen into his hands; and therefore did not follow the route which Lariat had had been anticipating.

The latter clung closely to the trail made by the animals, knowing that in so doing he could not go astray. But his danger was much increased thereby; for should Bozeman once suspect that the hostler was following him up, a trap could be arranged for the daring man.

With great patience and ingenuity the trailer

continued on this way, evincing an utter disregard of the fatigues of the route; and shortly before daylight had the satisfaction of knowing that he had pursued the road-agents to their lair.

This new home of the outlaws was a cave, before which a canyon stretched its apparently impassable gulf.

They had gained it by means of a light bridge, which had been let down for the purpose by some one within, and which had been afterward removed.

The entrance to the cave was almost concealed by the shrubs and vines which grew about its mouth; and this fact, with the yawning chasm in front, made it indeed a secure place of retreat.

For a long time Lariat Bill lay out on the rocky hillside in front of the canyon, turning over various plans for the relief of his friend. The shortness of the hours of darkness remaining made any considerable delay impossible. This also increased the peril of any attempt he might yet make that night.

At one time he had serious thoughts of postponing all effort for the time being, and remaining in the hills throughout the ensuing day. But this course might prove fatal to his friend, the Hummer.

How to cross the chasm was a matter that puzzled him; it was too wide to be leaped, and the walls were seemingly too precipitous to be scaled. Besides, the canyon was of great depth.

He crept close to its edge hoping to find some means of crossing it. Further up, along the opposite wall, a gnarled cedar had found foothold among the rocks and its scraggy branches projected over the gulf. It suggested an idea.

He crawled back to his former position, and by a roundabout way approached the cedar.

As on every expedition of importance, Lariat Bill had with him his lasso. A strong branch of the cedar projected to within fifteen feet of the point where he stood. It was not fifteen feet horizontally, but upward at an acute angle, the horizontal distance being scarcely more than six feet.

The limbs seemed sturdy and capable of sustaining a weight much greater than that of the hostler. It appeared, however, a risky and ticklish business to trust one's life to such a support.

As carefully as the gloom would permit, he scanned the point where the tree clung to the rocks. Of the security of his hold, however, he could determine little, owing to the darkness.

Yet it had clung there, probably, throughout a hundred years of storm and wind, thus attesting the strength of its roots and the firmness of its footing.

The wall stretching from it to the mouth of the cavern was more broken and less precipitous than on the side next Lariat Bill. Whether he would be able, though, to make his way along it or not, once it had been gained, was a point still to be determined.

The moments were flying, and not much time was left for hesitancy and delay. What was to be done must be done quickly, if at all.

He unslung his lasso and coiled it ready for a cast; then with true aim hurled the noose over the projecting bough.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DECEPTIVE GALLERY.

WHEN the noose had tightened about the bough, he drew on the rope to test it. Sure it would sustain his weight, he fashioned the loose end of the lasso into loops, into which he thrust his legs. Then grasping the rope firmly above his head with both hands, he swung off the edge of the precipice.

He felt the limb bend and tremble beneath his weight, and for one thrilling moment seemed poised in mid-air like a bird. Below him yawned the black depths, where the cruel, ragged rocks were sown like dragons' teeth. The wind rushed by him, whistling, and the shadows into which he descended were dark and ominous.

Then, like the weight of a clock pendulum, when it has passed the center of gravitation, he began to rise; the gnarled cedar seemed to fly toward him; and the next instant, he was clinging, panting, bruised and exhausted to its sheltering branches.

Here he rested for a time, then climbed to the bough where the lasso had caught, and removed it. He then crawled slowly down the body of the tree, and soon stood among the heaped boulders at its base.

The greatest peril had been passed in safety, but those to come were sufficiently nerve-thrilling. There was barely footing along the face of the cliff for a mountain goat; yet, by a constant use of both hands and feet, together with unceasing watchfulness, he managed to cross the intervening distance to the cavern without accident.

It had been now fully an hour since the outlaws entered the cave and scarcely another hour remained of the night.

On hands and feet he crept through the bushes which half-screened the aperture. Here, lying flat, he waited till his eyes should become accustomed to this deeper gloom.

In a little while he could see sufficiently well to note the form of the guard. He was seated on a stone not far from the entrance. His gun lay between his limp arms, and he was fast asleep.

The fatigues of the night had been too much for him; and observing him thus, an increased hope came to the heart of the hostler. If the guard was slumbering at his post, it seemed more than likely that the other members of the band had also yielded to the wooings of the drowsy god.

With movements as silent as those of a gliding serpent, he advanced upon the unconscious man. Silently he rose up beside the guard, clutched him by the throat with the fingers of one brawny hand, and with the other pressed a handkerchief against his mouth to stifle any cry that might arise.

The fellow, thus suddenly awakened, made a gallant struggle, though he could have little idea of who or what he was fighting. But the surprise had been too complete. Not for a moment did the clutching fingers relax their hold, the hostler bending every energy to prevent any sounds from entering the cavern.

Having almost choked the man into insensibility, he bound him with the lariat, and effectually gagged him with the handkerchief.

Then he carried him into the dense shadows beneath the bushes.

He came back and listened for any indications that an alarm had reached the outlaws. All was as silent as before.

With much circumspection he made his way into the cave. A fire had been built after the return of the band, of which there were now only a few smoldering brands. Their light was sufficient, however, to enable him to observe the forms of the sleeping men, stretched in various attitudes over the floor.

He stood for a time endeavoring to determine which was that of the Hummer. But for the bonds upon the latter's wrists and ankles, he would have been at a loss.

There were two men lying near Hartsook, over whose bodies he must make his way. This he succeeded in doing to his entire satisfaction. Then, with knife in hand, he stooped over his friend, giving him at the same time a gentle shake.

The latter opened his eyes, but made no sign. This attempted deliverance was to him not wholly unexpected. He had fancied that Lariat Bill might follow him, and the matter had been so impressed on his mind that he had slept but lightly.

"Sh!" and Lariat Bill lifted a finger, warningly. "It's me, Hartsook. Don't make a move, or you'll have 'em atop of us in a minute!"

Seeing that the Hummer fully comprehended, he crouched at his side and cut the cords that bound the prisoner's hands. Those about the feet followed instantly.

"Now, we'll see if we can't git out of this devil's nest," he whispered. "I've tied up the guard, an' these fools air sleepin' like logs."

He thrust the knife into Hartsook's hand, and drew his revolver.

So catlike had been all his movements, that the sleeping bandits still snored, unconscious of all that was taking place.

Warily they began their retreat toward the entrance, and had reached the fire when an unforeseen circumstance interposed to thwart all their plans.

Bozeman Jack, as was his custom, had retired into one of the galleries, where he had a soft couch of skins. He had not slept well, and, feeling oppressed by the close atmosphere of the place, had started toward the entrance for a breath of fresh air.

As he came out of the gallery he saw them near the fire, and though his vision was not yet clear, he knew that something was wrong.

Like a bugle-blast his shout stirred the outlaws into instant activity.

He was between the retreating men and the mouth of the cave; and two of his men springing to his side, the way of escape was thus blocked.

At almost the same moment, the outlaws sleeping near the walls and in the galleries, rushed half-dressed toward the center of the chamber. Thus the capture of Lariat Bill and Hartsook seemed inevitable.

"This way," said Hartsook, assuming the initiative, and darting toward the nearest opening. This was a gallery leading he knew not whither, but it seemed to offer some hope of liberty. At any rate it was the best, and the only thing they could do.

The outlaws, roused so suddenly from sleep, knew not what had happened, nor what to expect. The men near the fire they had supposed to be of their own band. Hence they had rushed to Bozeman Jack, directed to him by his cries.

He was fuming furiously.

"There they go!" he screamed, pointing to the vanishing forms. "Don't let 'em git away from ye! Crowd 'em! Shoot 'em!"

He had drawn his own weapons and fired at the fleeing men.

Understanding now what was desired of

them, the outlaws rushed toward the gallery, whooping and yelling like madmen.

Hartsook and Lariat Bill had not been injured by Bozeman's fire; and having gained the shelter of the gallery, pressed on with reckless speed. There might be pitfalls abounding, or even chasms with deadly depths, but they could not delay.

Frequently they bruised themselves against boulders and scraped painfully against projecting rocks, but in such a race—a race for life—these were matters of small account.

They felt that the gallery must lead somewhere, possibly to freedom; but wherever it led, having entered upon it, they must follow it. There might be in the depths of the mountains places with which even the outlaws were not familiar, and where they could find temporary refuge.

The gallery twisted in bewildering zig-zags, now descending and then ascending, dipping to the right, and anon to the left.

They heard the yelling of the outlaws, who were crowding in quick pursuit. The sounds were not reassuring. Frequently they halted, as the tumult seemed to die away, hoping their pursuers had taken another track, and been led into some side gallery. Whether or not there were such side galleries, they could not tell. Their flight had been too precipitate.

"It seems to me we've run far enough to come out on t'other side the mountain!" Lariat Bill pantingly exclaimed, in one of these halts. "I don't think I ever see jist sich another place in all my life!"

"It's bound to end somewhere!" said Hartsook, who was beginning to feel that he could not run much further. "I feel that I'm a mass of bruises. My! how those rocks do hurt when a fellow jams up against them! I believe my clothes are in rags!"

"An' the feathers?"

"The cuckoo wings are fluttering as gallantly as of yore. My good friend, I never haul down my banner."

He laughed lightly; then started, as the sounds of pursuit swelled again into a roar.

"They're b'ilin' along, ag'in!" and the hostler drew in his breath for another run. "We'll have to do some b'ilin', too, or we'll be tuck!"

The sounds came nearer and nearer, and knowing that the outlaws were again coming up with them, they turned once more in flight.

The same difficulties were re-encountered; the same falls and bruises, the same scraping against rocks and boulders.

Then, to their joy, they saw before them a cavern. It was scarcely lighted at all, yet seemed strangely like the one they had left.

"If there's only a way out of it!" and Hartsook paused for an instant. "I feel like I'd be willing to leap a half-dozen canyons like the one before the mouth of the other cave!"

The yells behind him urged him on; and racing at Lariat Bill's side, he rushed into the chamber.

Only to fall headlong on the rocky floor! It was the same chamber, not another. Bozeman Jack and a number of his men lay there in waiting for them, with trip-ropes stretched across the opening of the passage. The deceptive gallery had not led them to freedom!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"THE GATES OF GAZA."

AS soon as they fell prostrate over the tripping ropes, Bozeman and his men were upon them, and in a trice, they were bound hand and foot.

It was to them a most disagreeable surprise. That the winding gallery should lead them back to the very place from whence they had started, was a thing for which they were wholly unprepared.

Bozeman Jack's mad rage was jubilantly tempered by this successful result of his trick. When he saw them enter the passage, he knew they could not escape from it, but had sent a number of his men after them to hurry them more speedily into his net.

"Two instead o' one, now!" he exultantly cried. "The Hummer an' his side pard—which the same is the very identical chap what we had in our clutches at t'other camp."

Those who had been in pursuit came up quickly after; and when they had had opportunity to examine the prizes, Bozeman commanded that the latter should be dragged to a point near the center of the chamber, and there left bound.

The light of the new day was now at hand, a few sickly rays penetrating to the heart of the cave.

If the road-agent leader had followed what he knew to be the wishes of his chief, Captain Playfair, he would have sentenced his captives to instant death. He had reasons of his own, however, for not doing so. Ever since the night of his quarrel with Playfair, he had felt that the time was coming when a rupture between the two must result.

True, a peace had been patched up; but he believed this peace could only be temporary. It seemed to him that Playfair was becoming daily more reckless of the comfort and lives of the members of the band, more exacting in his demands, and harder to please. The fight at

Hummingbird still rankled in Bozeman's mind, coming up constantly as a bitter memory.

Playfair had been helpful to them in many ways, but he had received full pay for all he had done. Of all the stores of gold-dust captured, he had had his share. Yet, in these new ventures, filled as they were with peril and even death, there appeared to be no compensation for Bozeman and his men. Lives had been imperiled at Cuckoo, men had been captured at Hummingbird, but not a dollar had come to the outlaws as a reward.

He had been commanded to slay Hartsook; and, reasoning along the same line, would be expected to slay this new prisoner, Lariat Bill.

Instead of this, however, he decided to hold them secretly, and send word to Playfair that his wishes had been carried out. Then, at some future time, should Playfair become obstreperous or malignant, he could produce the prisoners and cow his chief into submission to his will.

There was but one drawback to this fine scheme; and it was that, though he had had dealings with Captain Playfair for many a long week, he did not really know who the man was. Still, this knowledge might be forthcoming in the future, and at a time when most useful.

The day passed without incident worthy of note. To the prisoners it was a long and disagreeable one. Except when their meals were served to them, they were kept constantly bound; and a guard stationed near allowed them to converse but little.

Yet, for all this, they never lost hope. They were not the sort of men to give up easily. They had expected little mercy, knowing what Pendergast's will must be concerning them; and the delay brought a sense of grateful relief and a feeling that was almost akin to cheerfulness.

With the coming of another night, Lariat Bill began to be mentally restless. He felt that they must escape that night. If they could not escape, they must die in the attempt. Death in that manner was far preferable to being shot down like dogs.

He managed to whisper his thoughts to Hartsook.

"We must keep awake," said Hartsook in reply. "We don't know what may turn up in our favor. I am with you, if the least chance offers."

As if influenced by their wishes, Bozeman Jack and the major portion of his command left the cave before nightfall, bound probably on some professional expedition. Only four men were left in the cavern to watch over the prisoners.

As was the custom when night came, one of these took a position at the entrance, the other three remaining within.

At an early hour Lariat and the Hummer feigned slumber.

The trio of guards within retired to rest, stretching themselves on the floor of the cavern near the captives.

The night advanced. The fire burned lower and lower, until but a few embers glowed like dull, red eyes. A lone cricket tuned his membranous fiddle in the gloom of a gallery. Save this, all was still as death.

If one had been watching the prisoners closely he might, through the semi-gloom, have seen the hostler stir, wriggle slowly from side to side and twitch his hands spasmodically. The rope king had begun his work.

Within less than five minutes from the time he commenced work, he had succeeded in freeing one hand, and the task of releasing the other was but slight in comparison.

When he had accomplished this, he lay still for some time, narrowly watching the guards; then, without shifting his position, he slowly drew up his feet until his hands touched them, and fell to work on the bonds about his ankles.

Being now free, himself, he turned his attention to Hartsook. The Hummer had purposely lain on his side, thus bringing his bound hands, which were behind his back, next to Lariat Bill. The latter rolled half-over and began to untie the cords about the wrists of his friend.

Still the guards slumbered; and after another time of waiting and silence, the rope king screwed himself into a position enabling him to reach the Hummer's feet. He had Hartsook's knife, now, and saved through the cords without taking the trouble to untie them.

The long time in which they had been tied up in this cruel fashion had rendered their limbs stiff and cramped; and, although free so far as their bonds were concerned, they lay quiet for some minutes to give their blood a chance to circulate in the benumbed members.

Hartsook again had the knife which he managed to conceal after being recaptured. But the hostler was weaponless. There was a club lying near the fire, and with this he armed himself.

The two then stole from their position on tip-toe, taking with them the cords with which they had been bound, moving silently and so slowly that it seemed they did not move at all, and looking constantly at the slumbering guards.

The point of greatest danger being passed, they breathed more freely, and drew into the black shadows near the further wall for a whispered consultation.

"We'll have to capture the sentinel outside,"

said Hartsook. "If we fail in that, we'll have a hard time of it. Your lariat was carried into one of the galleries, and so we can't depend on it to help us over the canyon. I presume one couldn't make it by a jump from the top of the old cedar?"

"Nary!" and Lariat Bill shook his head. "We'd jump straight to the bottom if we tried it. Besides, I don't think a feller could manage to stand on the limb, at all. It ain't a hefty one."

"We must capture the guard, first; then we'll settle on something."

Being more experienced in work of this kind, the hostler led the way through the passage to the canyon.

The guard here was not asleep, as were his comrades. He was not dreaming of danger, however, and thus fell an easy victim to the wary and agile Lariat.

With the stealthiness of a savage, the latter crept up behind, and gave him a tap on the head with the club that dropped him senseless. The blow, though, was not a deadly one. The hostler had no desire to commit murder, and only wished to stun the man for a moment, that he might the more easily and quietly secure him. In this he was successful, for no sound of the blow penetrated to the interior of the cave.

When the fellow was safely bound with the cords brought, Lariat Bill kept watch over him, while Hartsook went in search of the light bridge which they knew must be kept near. It had been used by Bozeman and his men that evening, and he had noticed that it had not been fetched into the cavern.

Without much difficulty he found it, lying on a rocky shelf not ten feet from where the guard had sat. It was but the work of a moment for the two to lower the bridge across the chasm. For this purpose ropes were attached to one end—what may be termed the top end.

When they had crossed the bridge, they drew it to that side thus effectually blocking pursuit.

"Now, like Samson with the Gates of Gaza, we'd better carry this away with us," Hartsook suggested. "The fellows in the cave can't get out; and if we carry the bridge away, neither can the others get in when they return. It will be a new way of burning the bridges behind us."

He had hardly given the words utterance, when the guard at the cave's entrance who had regained his senses and succeeded in getting the gag out of his mouth, sent up a terrific yell.

"Now, we must run for it!" and Hartsook lifted one end of the bridge. "I'm not afraid of those fellows in there, but a howl or two like that might bring Bozeman Jack down on us. We can't tell how far he has wandered."

Lariat Bill took up the other end of the bridge, and they sped away over the rocks in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

"I think me I petter do a leedle skirmeshin' around!" and the new hostler, coming into the parlor where Edith Pendergast was sitting, drew his face into a look of comical gravity.

"Oh, do take off that Dutch mask!" she laughed.

"We can never be sure that no one is listening to or watching us!" dropping the dialect, and sinking his voice to little more than a whisper. "Lariat Bill hasn't returned with Hartsook, as I expected he would before this time, and I'm becoming anxious. I must find out something about them; and to do that I must do some skirmishing."

Was Old Adamant falling in love with this handsome young woman? The look he bent on her indicated as much.

"What new peril to-night?" she anxiously asked.

"I go to the Cuckoo's Nest. What I shall do there is as yet unknown to me. But if the judge or any of his men know aught concerning Hartsook or Lariat Bill, I shall endeavor to find means of learning it."

He bent on her another tender glance. Further remarks were cut short, however, by the sound of footsteps in the hall. Instantly, Adamant was Jacob Schwartz, the Dutchman; and as such he passed into the hall and out at the door. The footsteps had been only those of Betty Blessington; but they had been sufficient to recall him to the ever-present peril by which he was surrounded.

As he had stated to Edith, he went straight toward the Cuckoo's Nest; sauntering slowly along, however, with his hands thrust deep into his wide pockets and his mind apparently preoccupied.

There was the usual crowd of loungers in front of this popular resort. The hour was yet comparatively early; and the heavy gaming, which generally drew the attention of every one, had not commenced.

In accordance with his intention of shadowing the judge, he slouched heavily into the bar-room, and took his seat on one of the long benches that ran around the wall. The judge was present, conversing with Arkansaw Tom and Cockney Joe, but the German took no apparent heed of

them, and fell into talk with a man sitting near him.

The new hostler had become a common figure in the Cuckoo's Nest; hence his entrance passed unnoted. Pendergast scarcely gave him a thought.

The judge remained in the bar-room for several hours, taking a hand in one or two games of cards, and holding occasional conferences with Arkansaw and Cockney Joe. He then went up-stairs to his room.

This was what the German had long been waiting for.

"I guess me I ought to be going to mein roosting place uff I oxbect to do any vork py do-morrow," he observed, rising to leave the saloon. "I vhas vheel as shleeby as ten togs!"

He yawned and stretched himself, pulled his hat down over his eyes and shambled into the street.

He had no sooner reached the concealing shadows than his manner changed. The apparent sleepiness vanished as if by magic; and with alert, quick footsteps he hastened to the rear of the building. Here he softly mounted the rickety staircase leading to the garret, the same which Betty Blessington had ascended on the unfortunate night which witnessed her capture and discomfiture.

He seemed to know the way well, for he passed into the garret without the slightest sign of hesitation. When he came to the trap-door, he cautiously lifted it out of place; then drew a light but strong rope ladder from beneath his coat, attached an end to a staple in the floor and lowered the ladder through the hole.

"They knew Betty would never attempt this trick again," he soliloquized. "And seem to have thought that there was no danger of any one else trying it."

But Old Adamant had tried it frequently; having, in the character of Jacob Schwartz, descended through the trap-door almost every night during the week past.

He listened intently for some moments, trying to discover sounds of talking in Pendergast's room. He heard the loud voice of Cockney Joe, and was reassured thereby.

Feeling pretty certain that Pendergast and the gamblers were holding one of their numerous conferences, he slipped through the hole and slowly descended the swaying ladder.

Having gained the corridor, he approached the door in a crouching attitude. Cockney Joe was talking to Turnbull, but their conversation dwelt on the gains and losses of the night, and so had no special interest for the listening man.

He glued an eye to the key-hole and looked into the room. The talkers were its only occupants. The knowledge thus gained brought a sense of uneasiness.

He drew back from the door with thoughts of ascending the ladder and waiting for a more favorable opportunity. But he was too late. Turnbull arose and came toward the door, opening it so quickly that Adamant had no more than time to gain the darkness of the further end of the corridor and there crouch in silence. Fearing the dangling ladder might be discovered, he had drawn it close against the wall, and there held it to prevent its swaying and attracting attention.

The gloom of the place favored him. Turnbull did not once look toward that end of the corridor, but directed his gaze toward the stairway leading to the saloon. Adamant had drawn and cocked his pistol to be ready in case of an attack, and almost suppressed his breathing as he pressed closer against the floor.

The gambler stood there a moment. Then he was joined by Cockney Joe, and the two went below stairs.

As they did so, Adamant heard a sound in the garret above him. It was made by one of the servants of the place, who had gone up there to look for some needed article. A fatality seemed to attend the movements of the Man of Rock that night, for it was but seldom indeed that any one visited the garret.

In an instant he heard a cry of astonishment, showing that the servant had discovered the open trap. The cry was followed by loud shouts intended to attract the attention of those in the saloon.

Old Adamant wondered if the whole thing was not preconcerted, and if it had become known that he had ascended to that point for the purpose of spying. It looked very much like it.

"Have they tumbled to my Dutch disguise, and been watching me?" was his mental query. "If they have, I'm in a hole!"

If they had, as he more than half-feared, he was in a worse pickle than even Betty Blessington had been, as he could not hope to receive the lenient treatment that had been accorded to her on account of her sex.

The calls of the servant reached the saloon; and Adamant heard the patter of feet as several men hurried to see what the matter was. At the same time, also, he heard Pendergast and Turnbull coming up the stairway, recognizing them by their voices.

"What's the row?" he heard Turnbull inquire of his companion.

The judge stated that he did not know. "That may be a game to deceive me," Adamant commented. "What am I to do? They're in the stairway, and the outlet through the garret is blocked. If I stay here I'm liable to be caught, and will be as soon as those fellows above gather enough courage to descend through the trap."

His first thought was that he might be able to remain quiet where he was till Pendergast and Turnbull had gained the room, and then make a break for liberty down the stairway. But if the stairway should be guarded he could not get out by it.

The door of the judge's apartment had been left ajar by Cockney Joe and Turnbull, and into this room the Man of Rock hurried. He succeeded in passing its portals, too, before the judge and Turnbull reached the top of the stairway.

Straight to the closet he went, turned a key in the lock, and entering, drew the door to after him. Then he locked the closet door from the inside.

The trap-door leading through the closet floor had been, as stated by Betty Blessington, nailed up. But Adamant had given that fact due consideration.

From one of the voluminous pockets of his coat he drew out a device fashioned somewhat after the pattern of a burglar's jimmy.

This he inserted between the boards, and with a surge pried two of them asunder. Two or three more heavy wrenches so loosened the trap that he was able to lift it out of place and look into the black depths leading to the coal cellar.

This was not accomplished too soon. The men in the garret had descended by the rope-ladder, and were met in the corridor by Pendergast and his friend.

"Don't let him escape!" he heard the judge command sharply. "He's in the building. He may be in my room."

Of course Pendergast could not know who the spy was, but that did not make him any the less anxious, nor did it lessen the fears and dangers of Adamant.

He slipped through the hole in the floor, scudded for the cellar and in the direction of the street.

The judge, who did not know who might be in the room and who had no desire to unnecessarily expose his precious person, ordered some of the men to search the room; while he hastened down-stairs.

Pendergast was shrewd, and remembered the coal-hole through which Betty had made her escape. Taking two or three men with him, he ran in that direction; and came near it just in time to see the supposed German emerge therefrom and scud for the sheltering shadows.

"Overreached again!" he cried, in disgust, firing at the retreating figure. "That fellow pulled the wool over my eyes beautifully. Ten to one it's Adamant or one of his friends!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

DEFYING THE ENEMY.

OLD ADAMANT knew he had been seen, and the fact was, therefore, patent, that he could no longer make himself useful in the disguise of Schwartz, the Dutchman. Whether the judge had penetrated the disguise and recognized him, or even suspected him of being the Man of Rock, he could not tell; but, at any rate, the work of the night had ended in dismal failure. He had discovered nothing; the whereabouts of the Hummer and the hostler were still unknown to him, and he had, himself, narrowly escaped capture.

Concerning Lariat Bill and Hartsook, however, his mind was set at ease before morning by the appearance of those worthies. They had encountered no difficulty in making their way out of the hills, after leaving the cave.

"I tell you what it is," said Adamant, when they were discussing the turn of affairs, "we'd better show our hands soon. I've about collected the evidence which has so long been baffling us, and am nearly ready to spring the trap."

"In that case," and the Hummer shook out his blonde locks in the old, familiar manner, "you can't hurry things any too fast for me. I'm tired of being branded a road-agent and horse-thief; of being jailed and shot at; and of being held as a captive in a stuffy cave with the expectation of soon being made a target of. Lay on, Macduff!"

"It may not be advisable to move too soon!" and Adamant rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "It might create a stampede. To be too precipitate might lose us the game, yet. I shall lay the mine, though, and get everything ready for the explosion."

"In the mean time, we can let the good people of Cuckoo know that we haven't fled the country to escape the clutches of detective officers, as they have been so frequently told of late."

Nothing could have suited the Hummer better. He was, as he had said, growing tired of being placed in a false light.

The next morning, the two sought out Lariat Bill, and, accompanied by him, made their way to Arkansaw's establishment. Pendergast had not yet retired. The work and the excitement of the night had kept him in a feverish state, and he had not felt the need of sleep.

Arkansaw was in the room, as were also the trio of gamblers, who had now become their almost inseparable companions.

The Man of Rock had resumed his stooping attitude and all of the old peculiarities which characterized him.

The men in the bar-room opened their eyes in widest astonishment as they saw the three enter.

"Good-morning, gentlemen!" and Adamant bowed as politely as if they had been his warmest friends.

"Good-morning!" and the Hummer imitated his example, doffing his bewinged hat and almost sweeping the floor with it.

Lariat Bill said nothing, but kept his keen eyes on the men ranged in front of the bar. He feared treachery from them, and had resolved not to be caught napping.

Arkansaw's hand crept instinctively to the revolver he kept under the bar for emergencies. Silk-Hat Sid whitened perceptibly, Pendergast blanched to a paler and more sickly hue than even that usual to him, while the others showed in various ways their agitation.

"It seems to me you are over-bold!" Pendergast observed, making as brave a show as possible. "Aren't you really afraid there will be a mob at your heels directly?"

Looking into the eyes of Old Adamant he knew that the latter was none other than the Dutch hostler.

"We came to warn you fellows that we don't propose to be trifled with any longer!"

It was Adamant who made the declaration, and his voice was as calm and steady as when he had bade them good-morning.

"We propose to go about this town as we used to, regardless of any lies you may tell us; and we warn you to think twice before you conclude to molest us again!"

With this he backed through the doorway and, with his friends, took his departure from the place.

They were no sooner out of the room than the judge sent the men with him into the town to arouse their friends and communicate to them what had occurred, and also to arouse the mob element of the camp against the alleged road-agents.

Their efforts were so successful that within a quarter of an hour they had collected a mob of more than twenty men of the scoundrelly class they relied on to do their dirty work.

But in the interval Adamant and his friends had not been idle. They, likewise, gathered a crowd; and this crowd and the mob of Pendergast's adherents met in front of the Cuckoo's Nest.

Here weapons were drawn, hot words passed, and for a time a general fight seemed imminent. Red Selkirk, instigated by Pendergast, came close up to the Hummer and shouted:

"Surrender, Mr. Hartsook! Ye'r my prisoner! I ain't a-wantin' to hurt nobody, nor nothin', but your place is back in that air jail, from which yer road-agent pards tuck ye. An' Mr. Adamant's place is there, too; an' b'gosh, back there ye'll go, if I have to kill ye first!"

"Now, see here!" and Adamant mounted a dry-goods box. "We are not and never have been road-agents, and no one knows it better than the marshal of this camp."

"Gentlemen!" his eyes flashing fire as they roved over the faces upturned before him.

"We've heard enough of these charges. I defy any man to prove them! The Hummer from Hummingbird does not go back to that jail, neither do I go there, nor my friend, Lariat Bill, nor any one else, on these trumped-up charges!"

"I am responsible for my words. If any man has aught against me, let him say so, and I stand ready to give him full satisfaction. It's been said that I'm Bozeman Jack, the road-agent. It's a lie; and no one knows it better than Judge Pendergast! If he knows who Bozeman Jack is, and he may, he will do well to keep shady on such subjects."

"We don't want a fight here, this morning. You don't, and I don't. It would probably please a few men in this place, who would be careful to keep out of the way of the bullets and the knife-thrusts. And those same bullets and knife-thrusts wouldn't be all on one side of the line, permit me to assure you."

"I have good friends here, who will stand by me in this tussle till the end. Because I am a candidate against the judge is no reason why he should villify me. I am a candidate against him; and I shall beat him at the polls!"

The speech was not without excellent effect. For one thing, it showed to Pendergast that Adamant felt more secure than ever, and that probably it would not be wise to crowd him too hard.

Nevertheless, he kept up a constant agitation among the men about him, intended as much for effect as anything else.

"Will not some one bring me that Philistine's

head on a charger?" exclaimed Silk-Hat Sid, trying to conceal his uneasiness under an assumed lightness of manner.

No one cared to make the effort; and the crowds, after much quarreling and bickering, slowly dispersed, leaving Adamant and his friends temporary masters of the situation.

CHAPTER XL.

A STORMY SCENE.

THIS defiant routing of Pendergast's forces and overthrowing of his plans brought him to the verge of angry despair. He had thought himself again secure. But now many who had clung to him were going over to the enemy; and those hostile to him—and of these the camp was full—were redoubling their energies, encouraged by the leadership of the Hummer and the Man of Rock.

If matters continued in this way he foresaw the complete destruction of his most cherished schemes, and his defeat at the polls.

His great weapon was money. He had scattered his gold as freely as if it had been the merest sand. But that did not seem to, be enough. Those who feed on gold become the hungrier for it, and are never satisfied. He had showered gold about him, and must continue to do so if he hoped to win.

But where was he to obtain the gold?

He went to his room to gain time for thought, and also to try to secure some needed rest. He slept but little, however, because of his anxiety.

When he came down he said nothing to any one in the bar-room, and bent his steps toward home. On arriving there, he sent Betty Blessington for Edith.

She obeyed the summons and met him in the parlor.

"We will go up-stairs," he said. "I should not have sent for you if I had known you were there. Here, we are liable to be intruded on, and I have something very important to say."

She was on the point of refusing, for she did not like his looks, but thought better of it and accompanied him to the little sitting-room on the second floor.

"I must have money," he said, drawing the door to after him and turning the key in the lock. "As I don't know where else to go, I come to you for it."

"Me!" and she looked at him in astonishment.

"That's what I said!" placing his back against the door. "I must have money, and I've come to you for it."

"But I haven't any; only the little change in my purse. You ought to know that."

"You have that which will bring money. I mean the Gold Bug Mine. That is held in your name. I have found a buyer for it and you must sell it!"

"Well, I shall do no such thing! The money that came to me from my mother is invested in that. Let me pass. You have no right to address me in such tones."

"Hear me out," he said, a sneer on his face. "There's no use arguing the matter. I have found a man to take the Gold Bug Mine, and I intend to have the money it will bring. I have a deed here in my pocket all ready for your signature. I have also pen and ink."

He drew out the articles and held them up for her inspection.

"Let me pass!" she demanded again, half-rising from her seat. "If you do not, I shall call for Betty."

He laughed bitterly and defiantly.

"Call as much as you please, she'll not hear you. I sent her down town on an errand that will keep her busy for an hour or more."

The frightened girl dropped back into her chair, startled and gasping.

"It is your father who commands you!" the same bitter sneer distorting his face. "From the way you have acted for the past month, I presume you have entirely forgotten that I am your father. Aiding and abetting my enemies is, I suppose, your way of showing filial devotion."

The terrified look on her face increased.

"Why don't you speak?" he demanded. "I am your father, am I not? Then I command you! Put your name to this deed!"

"You are not my father!" she asserted, drawing on every energy for a defense. "I shall not sign that deed!"

"Oh, I am not your father? When did that delectable bit of news reach you? And when did I cease to be your father, pray?"

From the light in his eyes she saw that he was aware she knew the truth. It only served to increase her fear of him. Yet, she determined not to yield a single point.

"We will not discuss that. I know that you are not my father, though you once deceived me into thinking you were."

"Very well, then, let it pass. Here is the deed. Put your name to it. It's money I'm after, just now, not daughterly affection."

"I will not!" and she settled back, resolutely.

He drew from his pocket a small revolver and cocked it. He did not point it at her, but held it menacingly in his hand. She trembled a

little, as she looked at the weapon, but did not falter in her resolution.

"Will you sign this deed?" he asked. "My patience gets mighty thin when it's strung out over so much space."

"No!" and her tones were as firm as before.

"Have a care!" a black look settling over his face.

"I will not! You can kill me, but you can't make me sign that paper!"

He had half lifted the revolver, but dropped it at his side.

"It wouldn't be a bad plan, that. If you were out of the way, I would come in as your rightful heir, and there would be none of this fooling over a deed."

He lifted the weapon again.

"Will you sign?"

"I will not!"

He dropped the revolver into his pocket, took a quick step toward her, grasped her by the shoulder, and half lifted her from the chair.

An involuntary scream arose to her lips, but there were no windows open, and it did not penetrate far.

"I've had enough nonsense!" he exclaimed, tightening his grasp and dragging her toward the door.

She whitened to a corpse-like hue under the pain and terror, but did not cry out again, probably because she felt it would be useless.

He unlocked the door and drew her into the hall.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

"See if I can't put a stop to this foolishness!"

This was all the explanation he gave; but continued to drag her along the hallway. Arriving in front of her room, he pushed open the door and thrust her in.

"Now, for the last time, will you sign that deed?" and he again drew the paper from his pocket. "Think twice before you say you won't, for I'm not going to talk here all day."

She was shaking like a leaf, and the tears came into her eyes as she sunk into a sitting posture on the bed.

"Why treat me this way?" she implored. "Why not kill me at once? You are murdering me by inches!"

"Will you sign that deed?" looking straight at her, but giving no apparent heed to her distress.

She hid her face against the pillow and began to sob violently.

"You are a woman; there's no doubt about that. Tears are a woman's best weapon. But they are falling on a mighty hard rock, to-day. If you expect to get out of here this summer, you'd better dry those pretty eyes and make a try at penmanship. You oughtn't have forgotten how to write your name, you are so knowing!"

She made no reply in words.

"You won't, then? Well, you can remain here until you come to your senses, if it's a day or a month. When you get ready to sign this deed I'll let you out, and not before. I've got to have money for use in this election, and the Gold Bug Mine must get it for me."

She continued to sob, but did not answer.

"When you get ready to talk, send for me. Until that time, good-by!"

He went softly out, locking the door after him, and she heard him descend the stairway. A few minutes afterward a ladder was elevated against the side of the house near the window. She listened anxiously as he climbed up to it, and her heart sunk as the heavy bars of the shutters were shot into place.

All the windows of the building were fitted with bars, as a protection in times of riot. They were heavy things, and could be fastened either from within or without. She wondered at first at him doing this, for she fancied it would be an easy matter for her to loosen the bars; but when she heard him drive some staples into the walls to hold the bars in place, she realized that she was a prisoner, and her heart sunk within her.

Having thus taken means to effectually prevent her escape, he waited below till he saw Betty returning. When she came up, he handed her her pay to date, and politely informed her that her services were no longer required, and that the house would no longer shelter her.

"I can get my clothes?" she asked. "And see Edith?"

"You can get your clothing; yes. But you can't see Edith. She has a headache. And the fact is, for I want to be plain, she and I have had a little tiff, and she isn't in a presentable condition!"

Betty made no protest, but kept her thoughts to herself, and began to gather up her personal effects as soon as she entered the house. All the while, Pendergast stood by her, to see that she did not attempt to ascend to Edith's room.

As soon as she was gone he went in search of a woman whom he could trust to do his bidding, ask no questions, and keep her mouth shut.

CHAPTER XLI.

THROUGH PRISON BARS.

HE found such a woman in the person of Mollie Stubbs. Mollie's mental state seemed molded for the occasion. Since Edith had so precipitately dismissed her from her service,

Miss Stubbs had cherished for her a fierce and burning hate.

"I could see her gibbeted!" she had often told herself. "To pack me off the way she did, as if I was no more than a nigger! The mean, stuck-up thing!"

She was mopping the bar with a wet cloth, when Pendergast entered the Cuckoo's Nest. Arkansaw Tom was near, looking over some liquor scores. With the exception of these, the place was empty.

"Could you lend me your bar-maid for a time?" he asked, looking from one to the other.

Both stared in bewilderment.

"I am in earnest," he asserted, leaning over the bar and speaking in low tones. "I should like to have Mollie go down to my house for a few days, perhaps a week. I don't think I shall need her longer than a week."

Then he proceeded to explain his reasons for making the request.

"So she's come flat out an' told ye to yer teeth that ye ain't her pa, has she? I didn't 'low she'd ever have the grit!" Miss Stubbs simpered. "I think I kin tame 'er fer ye. I'll starve 'er till she'll be willin' to do 'most anything."

"You are a jewel of a woman!" and there was an under-current of irony in the judge's voice.

"Thank ye!" and Mollie smilingly bowed, accepting the compliment in all seriousness.

"She can go down there right away, I suppose?" turning to Arkansaw.

"She'll have to, I reckon. I'll manige to worry along, though I do need 'er bad!"

"I'll make it worth both your whiles!" understanding the meaning of Arkansaw's remark. "If I can force her to sign the deed to the Gold Bug Mine, I'll have plenty of money again, shortly."

Within a half-hour after this conversation, Miss Stubbs was at her old post in Pendergast's kitchen.

"I'll jist go up an' see how she's a-doin'," she observed, as she changed her dress and put on an apron.

Edith was doing remarkably well, to judge from appearances. She seemed to be making the best of her imprisonment; for, when Miss Stubbs poked her head through the door, she was seated in a rocker looking over the pages of a favorite magazine.

To the spinster's intense disgust, Edith evinced not the least surprise when she saw her.

"I shall not need you at present," she said, turning again to the pages of the magazine. "When I do, I shall ring."

This was an altogether unexpected reception; and Miss Stubbs, growing very red in the face, flounced out of the room in a high dudgeon.

"You'll be apt to ring two or three times before I go to your room ag'in!" she muttered; and then descended to the kitchen to nurse her wrath.

To "pay" Edith for her treatment of her, she resolved to take her no mid-day meal; and it was not till late in the evening that she ascended to the second floor with an inadequate amount of food, which was cold and poorly served.

Edith ate what was placed before her, without demur or comment; and again Miss Stubbs returned to her quarters in an ireful mood.

Darkness had set in, when there came a rap on the door of the kitchen. When it was opened, Betty Blessington glided in.

"I forgot some of my things, and I've come for them!" she said, returning Mollie's defiant stare. "The judge was in such a hurry when he sent me away, that he didn't hardly give me time to think."

"Where air they?" Miss Stubbs questioned. "I'll git 'em fer ye."

"No you won't, either!" and the black eyes flashed fire. "I'll get 'em myself. They're in my room—that is, they were there when I seen 'em last."

"Nobody'd be apt to steal anything belonging to you!" with a defiant toss of the head.

"Maybe they would, an' maybe they wouldn't!" Betty asserted, stoutly maintaining her ground. "I haven't been accusing anybody, have I?"

"No; but you're a-hintin'!"

"Then don't take lints so easily. The wicked flee, etc. You've heard the rest. Now, I'm going to my room."

"If you do, I'm a-goin' with ye!" and Miss Stubbs deliberately got up, and moved about the kitchen with much offensive bristling. "Yes, I'm a-goin' with ye. I'm in charge of this house now; and if they should be anything missin'—mind, I'm not sayin' 'at I think they will be!—but if they should be, I'd be held responsible."

Betty smiled in a way to drive Miss Stubbs half frantic.

"Certainly! Come along. You can help me look for the things."

She had gained her point; which, as the reader will see shortly, was an important one.

While she was thus engaging Mollie in conversation, three men lay in the shadows of the trees in the grounds. They were Old Adamant, the Hummer from Hummingbird, and Lariat Bill. They had crept into concealment there at about

the same time that Black-eyed Bess rapped on the kitchen door.

On being dismissed from the judge's service, she had made it her first duty to hunt up Hartsook and tell him what had taken place, and her conclusions concerning the same. Hartsook had found the Man of Rock a few minutes later, and to him repeated the story. To both it was plain that Edith was being held in the house as a prisoner; a conviction that found ample justification when they observed Miss Stubbs make her way to the building.

Hence they had planned a rescue. If they were wrong in their surmises, no rescue would be necessary, it is true; but they could ascertain the meaning of this latest movement of Pendergast.

Along in the evening they had sent Lariat Bill to reconnoiter the place and discover what he could; and when he returned with the statement that the windows of Edith's room were closed and barred, they hesitated no longer.

They reasoned that Miss Stubbs had been put there for the purpose of both watching Edith and to prevent any one from communicating with her or seeing her. That she would make a most zealous and watchful sentinel they had every reason for believing. And so they had sent Betty Blessington on her pretended errand, to engage the attention of the gentle Miss Stubbs and prevent her from discovering the movements and doings of the intended rescuers.

Betty felt that she had accomplished the task to perfection when she drew Mollie from the kitchen to the bedroom, and absorbed her in a hunt for the articles she claimed to have forgotten.

"I think the time must be ripe for a movement," observed Adamant, when they had crouched beneath the trees for some five minutes. "The women have had a chance to get their tongues in good running order. We haven't a moment to lose beyond what is absolutely necessary."

The others shared his feelings, and an advance on the house was commenced.

Lariat Bill, who was of course thoroughly familiar with the place and its belongings, quickly produced the ladder by which Judge Pendergast had climbed to the window. This they hoisted, using every precaution to keep it from scraping against the walls.

When it was in position, Lariat Bill removed his boots and ran up it with almost the agility of a cat. On gaining the window, he tapped sharply against the shutters with his knuckles.

"What is it?" questioned Edith, attracted by the sounds and stepping to that side of the room.

"It's me, Lariat Bill; an' Adamant an' the Hummer is below. Kin ye git out of the room?"

Edith so trembled with joy and excitement that she could scarcely make reply:

"I can't get out. Mr. Pendergast has shut me in here, and he's got Mollie Stubbs to watch me."

"K'rect!" he whispered to the men below. "It's jist as we thought." Then he turned again to the window.

"D'ye know how the judge fastened this thing?"

"He nailed it, I think."

Lariat ran his hands over the shutters until he encountered the staples.

"That's jist what he did! Hyer," to the men below, "pass me up them priers. No; I'll come down after 'em."

He climbed down the ladder, obtained the tool wanted, and was up again in a remarkably short time.

"Now, hyer goes!" for Edith's encouragement, as he wrenched and twisted at the staples. "We'll have ye out o' there, in a jiffy!"

The staples yielded under the strain he put on them; then he slipped back the bars and pulled the shutter opens.

"You'll have to open the winder from that side!" flattening his nose against the pane in an effort to see into the room.

This was an easy accomplishment; and Edith, with a bundle of clothing and some heavy wraps in her hands, was assisted over the window ledge by Lariat Bill, and to the ladder, which she descended easily to the ground.

The hostler closed the window and the shutters, and shot the bars into place, before following her. Then the ladder was carried to the point from whence it had been taken, and the quartette made their way as speedily as possible from the grounds.

Betty Blessington did not follow them for fully half an hour thereafter. She was determined to keep Mollie Stubbs busy until all danger was passed.

Edith and Betty fled to the home of one of Edith's friends; and from this point a letter was sent to Judge Pendergast, written and signed by Edith, in which she told him she had escaped and where she might be found. It ended with an emphatic declaration:

"I have taken refuge in this house of my friend, and here for a time I mean to remain. If you pursue me with further persecution and cruelty, I shall publish to the town the fact that you are not my father, and appeal to the chivalrous sentiment of the men of the place for protection."

CHAPTER XLII.
A DEEP-LAID SCHEME.

JUDGE PENDERGAST had been furious before; but on receiving this letter, his anger passed all bounds. In it Edith had over-reached him. The chivalrous sentiment of the town to which she had referred was something more than an intangible fiction. It was a feeling inherent in the breasts of the miners and mountaineers; and he realized that her call for aid, should she issue one, would not go unanswered.

This failure of his attempt to force Edith to sign the deed to the mine was of serious moment. No money would be forthcoming from that source, and he had counted strongly on this aid.

He was more imbibed than ever against Hartsook and Adamant. Had he dared, he would gladly have slain both. Their friends seemed to be rallying around them with more strength and courage, and added numbers, as each day passed. For this reason, he had ceased to press the charges against Hartsook and the Man of Rock.

Thinking over his failure in that effort, however, brought him a new idea. To carry it out would necessitate a deed from which he would have shrunk a month ago. But he was becoming daily more desperate.

He waited for the coming of night to initiate the new work he had resolved on. Then he took his way to the cabin of Whisky Tim. He found him there, in his usual half-maudlin condition.

He was aware of the fact that Tim had taken his failure to kill the Hummer much to heart, and had ever since cherished a feeling of revenge. The man had even been so foolish as to say as much to a number of his acquaintances.

"Hartsook has heard of what you've been saying about him," began the judge, gingerly seating himself in the rickety chair. "You better keep quiet if you don't want him to whip you again. As I was the means of getting you into the scrape in the first place, I just thought I'd drop down and warn you."

"I'll kill 'im yit!" Tim growled, straightening up and looking the judge full in the face. "I've sworn to do it, and I will!"

"You're afraid to!" and Pendergast laughed scornfully. "If you hadn't been you'd have had that five hundred long ago."

"I hain't had any chance," Whisky Tim pleaded. "He's been away a good 'eal lately, when he wuzn't in jail; and when he's aroun' hyer he's ginerly got frien's clost."

Again the judge laughed, that bitter, scornful laugh.

"It's easy to find excuses for not doing what we don't want to do or are afraid to do."

"I tell ye, I ain't afeard!"

The excitement of the talk was sobering the man; and as he looked fiercely at the judge with his red, bleary eyes, his appearance was villainously fiendish.

"I ain't afeard; and you're the only man that would da'st to say so to me! Plank me down some more of the boodle an' p'int 'im out to me an' I'll show ye."

Pendergast had a little money left, and he flipped a ten-dollar gold-piece onto the bed at Whisky Tim's side.

"I'll not point him out to you; but if you want to find him real bad, you won't have any trouble on that score. When I came down the street he was standing in front of the Cuckoo's Nest. Likely, he's there, yet, or near there."

Whisky Tim had clutched the coin eagerly; and while he gloated over it, Pendergast took the opportunity to silently withdraw.

Money could not remain long with Whisky Tim. He knew to a nicety just the number of drinks the coin would obtain, and was anxious to make his first inroads on it. With this in view, more than revenge, he soon after left the cabin and made his way up-town.

There were three or four low grogeries squatting like ill-omened birds of prey between his home and the more fashionable, but equally vile, drinking establishment of Arkansaw Tom: so that when he reached the vicinity of the Cuckoo's Nest, he was drunk enough to be exceedingly reckless and quarrelsome.

He did not see Hartsook as he came up, but a little after the latter strolled out of the bar-room in company with Lariat Bill.

The Hummer had heard something of the threatening talk which on various occasions Whisky Tim had engaged in, but as the threats had always ended in talk he had given the matter little heed. That Tim would attack him so long after, he did not regard probable.

When the whisky-crazed ruffian saw him leave the bar-room, however, he drew his revolver and opened fire.

There were not many men on the street at the moment, but those few took refuge in the doorway and around the corner of the building.

"Down on your face!" exclaimed Hartsook, as the weapon spouted its fire and the first ball swept dangerously near his head. "Hug the pavement."

"Lariat Bill did not literally obey, though he threw himself almost prostrate, only to wriggle into the shelter of the shadows.

Hartsook did not know, then, who the assailant was. As soon as his hands touched the

stones of the pavement, he rolled quickly over, rising a moment later at Lariat's side.

"It's Whisky," said the hostler. "I 'low he's come a-gunnin' fer ye."

"The pistol of a low-lived scamp like him will kill just as quick as the weapon of a better man!" drawing his own revolver, as Whisky Tim ran in their direction, still working his deadly tool.

The crowd within the saloon had surged to the doorway as the rattling sound of the firing was heard, but did not venture into the street, not caring to risk themselves in the way of stray bullets.

The shadows bewildered the ruffian as he advanced, and he did not see the two who were standing there, thinking they had fled around the building as others had done.

He was cursing furiously as he drew near, his revolver held ready for instant use, and looking for the form of the man he meant to slay.

He was looking beyond and into the gloom, when Hartsook leaped on him with a suddenness and force that hurled him to the earth.

Lariat Bill came to his friend's assistance; and in a shorter time than it takes to write it, Whisky Tim was disarmed and rendered helpless.

Seeing that the fray had ended, the men returned from the rear of the building, and the crowd surged out of the doorway.

"I ought to kill you for this!" and Hartsook looked down scornfully on the prostrate wretch. "This is the second time you've tried to do me up. Make it the last time, or you'll have cause to regret it."

"Gimme my gun, an' I'll kill ye, yit!" Tim howled, maddened at his failure.

"No; I'm not such a fool! I'll leave it here with Arkansaw Tom, and when you've got some of that whisky out of you, you can come and get it. But I'll not give it to you now."

"Gimme my gun!" the fellow repeated.

"And mind you, Tim, if you want to go to the graveyard in a hurry, just try this little game again!"

"Gimme that gun, I say!" and Whisky Tim, no longer restrained by the hostler, struggled to his feet. "Gimme that gun, er I'll murder you!"

"That's what you'd try to do, if I should give it to you. Have some sense and go on home, now!"

For reply the scamp whipped out a knife and made a dash at the man who was inclined to deal so leniently with him.

Lariat Bill saw the murderous movement and wrenched the knife away. At the same time he lifted his heavy boot and gave the fellow a sturdy kick.

"Now, go on home!" he cried, hotly. "We've had jist enough o' yer blamed foolishness!"

He took him by the shoulders and gave him a thrust down the street.

And the Hummer from Hummingbird, who was also justly enraged at this new attempt, added some hot words which he had cause to regret afterward.

CHAPTER XLIII.

MOVEMENTS AT HUMMINGBIRD.

YAWNEE BOB and Denver Jake, the two men who were doomed to death by Captain Playfair and Bozeman Jack, had never ceased to harbor deep resentment, and had likewise worked constantly for revenge.

To obtain this, they had entered into a combination with the officials of the bank and the authorities of the town of Hummingbird, the object of which was the capture of Bozeman and his band. Playfair would have been included had they but known where to find him.

For more than a week they had hovered along the mountain trails seeking the new location of their former companions. That the old one had been abandoned was one of the first discoveries they made. They had expected as much, and were consequently not disheartened.

To locate the new home of the outlaws was not an easy task. Bozeman and his men usually came and went during the hours of night and as they were haunted by the constant fear of pursuit and discovery, their movements were made with the utmost caution and stealth.

They might never have found the canyon cave had it not been for the flight therefrom of Hartsook and Lariat Bill.

When these made their escape, and the men asleep in the cavern were aroused by the shouts of the bound guard, direct pursuit was impossible, it is true; but indirect pursuit was not impossible. The mouth of the cave above the canyon was not the only means of egress and ingress. There was a tunnel entrance which connected one of the galleries with the outer world, and from this entrance the chase was commenced.

It was wholly fruitless, owing to the fact that the fleeing men had gained such a start, and because of the darkness.

The guards were much wrought up over the escape of the prisoners intrusted to their charge and continued their search long after it had become certain it could result in nothing. In fact, they did not return to the cave until the morn-

ing was well advanced. This returning in the daylight was contrary to orders, but was felt to be excusable under the circumstances.

Bozeman Jack and his men had come back some hours before, and the chief was naturally in a rage.

Denver Jake and Pawnee Bob chanced to be lying on a hillside a mile away, scanning the country through field glasses when the guards hove in sight. They did not descend from their perch to follow them, but kept them within the fields of the glasses until they saw them approach the canyon, cross the lowered bridge—for Bozeman finding the other gone had hastily rigged a new one—and vanished behind the bushes.

"They're holed up somewher in thet cliff!" Denver Jake exclaimed exultantly, as he lowered his glass and deposited it in its case. "I believe we've got 'em shore!"

Pawnee Bob was equally jubilant; and after having assured themselves that the men had not climbed the cliff or reappeared from behind the bushes, they descended the hill and picked their way carefully in that direction.

That day they succeeded in locating the front entrance to the cavern, and on the following, they found the tunnel.

They were now ready for the work that had been long planned.

Returning with all haste to Hummingbird, they made known their discoveries to the officials.

A meeting was called secretly, and attended by the spies.

"It's my opinion, gents," and Denver Jake, as spokesman for the twain, awkwardly got on his feet, "thet we kin rake 'em in easy. They're never a-dreamin' thet we've clapped our peepers onto thet blame badger-hole o' theirn."

"What are your plans?" one of the bank directors asked with solemn pomposity. "We stand ready to further them."

"Don't cal'late thet any p'tic'lar plans is needed, boss!" with an air as patronizing as the director's. "Give us men an' guns, an' a thousand in gold-dust at the eend o' the trail if we're successful, an' we'll git along 'thout plans. All thet's needed is to go fer 'em red hot, an' lay 'em out if they don't surrender."

The thousand in gold-dust, and the men and the guns, were voted; and that night Denver Jake and Pawnee Bob rode toward the mountains at the head of a well-armed posse.

When they gained the vicinity of the cavern, the force was divided, a number of the men being sent to the tunnel opening. These were under the leadership of Pawnee. Denver Jake, with those remaining, made his way to the canyon entrance.

They had brought with them a light bridge for crossing the chasm, which was carried by two of the horsemen, it being slung between the animals much as a stretcher might be.

When within a mile of the place, the horsemen were dismounted, and the animals left in charge of two of the force. Then, on foot the advance was recommenced.

When within two or three hundred yards of the canyon, Denver commanded a halt, and advanced alone for the purpose of reconnoitering. He crept close up to the chasm's brink, and flattened himself on the rocks directly in front of the cave's mouth.

As events proved, his point of observation was unwisely selected. He had not lain there more than five minutes, vainly peering into the gloom in the hope of ascertaining the state of the guard's vigilance when he heard a number of footsteps close behind.

His first thought was that his men were advancing without orders, and he was exceedingly angry thereat, but he quickly recognized his error. He caught the sound of spoken words, and knew the voice of Bozeman Jack.

A thrill of fear swept over him. To be caught thus at the very mouth of the cavern would be sure to bring down on him condign punishment.

He arose to his feet and tried to steal away. But, quiet as were his movements, he was heard, and some of the outlaws rushed at him, knowing he could not be a friend.

He might have escaped even then had not his foot struck a point of rock and rolled him in a heap to the ground.

In another second the road-agents were upon him.

"What have we got hyer?" Bozeman questioned, hurrying up, a tempest of anger in his words.

"Some blasted spy!" was the answer. "Don't know who, yit! Lariat Bill, like enough."

Denver Jake struggled with all the strength at his command, feeling that death faced him. But his struggles were fruitless. The men held him down, and quickly twined a lariat around his body and arms.

It did not occur to the captured man, until it was too late, to obtain aid by calling out to his men. He had so impressed on his mind the necessity of absolute silence in all that was done that the thought escaped him.

When he knew he could not get away and a threatening revolver warned him to quiet sub-

mission, he wondered if the noise of the fight had reached the men left in waiting; and if not, what they would do when he did not return.

Bozeman called softly to the guard, who lowered the bridge in response to the call, and the bandits crossed over with their captive. When the shelter of the cavern was actually gained, the leader struck a match and held it so that the light would reveal the prisoner's face.

A terrible oath escaped him when he saw who it was.

"What you doin' round hyer?" he demanded, with bitter emphasis. "I reckon you know what it means to be ketched this-a-way?"

Denver Jake fell on his knees before the angry man.

"I wanted to come back to th' band!" was the ready reply. "I've been a-huntin' fer you fellers for a good while, an' never tell jist an hour ago c'u'd I find ye."

"That's a lie!" and Bozeman drew his hand as if to strike him. "You've been a-layin' out there a-tryin' to find out suthin' so's ye could bring a lot o' fellers onto us!"

The frightened man protested his innocence.

"Ye'r a-lyin'!" Bozeman repeated, ordering him to be taken into the cave. "Ye'r a traitor an' a liar; an' you'll die the death of a traitor!"

The unhappy man gave a shriek which he meant his captors to think a shriek of despair, but which he hoped might penetrate to his followers outside and call them to his rescue.

CHAPTER XLIV.

RAKING IN THE ROAD-AGENTS.

It accomplished what he hoped for. The cry came to the men sharply and distinctly, and from its intonation they knew that Denver Jake was in trouble. But for the caution of the man who had been left in charge, a headlong rush for the canyon would have resulted.

"We'd better go slow, pards. Somethin's broke, I know. But we may git into a trap if we run down there without investigatin' a little. I 'low the road-agents have gobbled Jake, and the chances air about ten to one that they'll set a trap to gobble us."

The leader's words were recognized as words of wisdom, and the heedless impulse of the moment was checked.

Taking with him three of his best men, he moved slowly and carefully toward the canyon, and gaining a point opposite the mouth of the cave, made as good a survey as possible of the home of the outlaws.

The absence of Denver Jake, together with the cry that had come to them, was proof convincing of their worst fears. There could no longer be any doubt that Denver had been surprised and captured.

"We've got to git in there, some way, and as quick as we kin," he observed, peering into the gloom. "They won't be feelin' any too good toward Denver, an' will be mighty apt to do him up in short order."

How to get across the canyon was the puzzle. They had brought with them a bridge, it is true, but it would be a risky piece of work to try to throw it over the chasm, now. It was almost a certainty that a watchful sentinel was posted behind the bushes, and that his vigilance would be redoubled by what had just occurred.

The tree by which Lariat Bill had made his way across had been wholly removed by the outlaws. It had not only been cut down and borne away, but even the roots had been grubbed out and the rocks so re-arranged as to leave no trace of its former presence.

Almost despairingly the leader looked up and down the canyon. One of the men, who had been by turns sailor and cowboy, crept along the canyon to a point nearly opposite to where the tree had stood, and looked down the precipitous walls into the yawning gulf.

The light was poor, but he made out a number of projections along the face of each cliff. He then hurried back to his chief.

"I reckon I can make it," he said. "I'll go down one side the canyon wall and up the other. Stay here a minute."

He crept away over the rocks to the point where the remainder of the force had been left in waiting. Here he obtained two good lariats, which he quickly knotted together and returned.

With the lariats in readiness, he once more approached the brink of the chasm, accompanied by the leader. At one end of the long rope he formed a noose which he dropped over a point of rock. Then he climbed over the ledge and let himself carefully down the face of the cliff.

When the end of the rope was nearly reached, and the bottom of the chasm still invisible, he secured a footing on a narrow ledge.

"One of the boys 'll have to come down hyer," he whispered to the anxious man above. "An' you kind send fer some more ropes."

A few minutes later, a second man was swinging in mid-air, and making his way down the dangerous precipice.

When the two stood together on the ledge, the sailor-cowboy whispered another command, and the leader above removed the noose from the point of rock and let it drop into space.

It was quickly fastened over a projection on the ledge, and again the sailor-cowboy lowered himself into space.

This time, his feet touched the bottom of the canyon.

The man midway on the ledge dropped the noose to him, and was afterward drawn up with a second rope by his companions on that side of the chasm.

Meanwhile, the daring fellow at the bottom of the canyon had succeeded in hurling his rope over a point on the cave side of the chasm, and was making his way slowly up hand-over-hand.

He found another ledge when he had climbed to that point, and made a second successful cast of the rope; and in this painful and laborious manner worked up the face of the precipice until he gained the perilous ledge over which Lariat Bill had passed.

He drew up the rope and left it on the ledge, and then advanced toward the mouth of the cavern.

A sentinel was there, as had been anticipated, but he was not as vigilant as he might have been. He was too much interested in the proceedings within the cave, directing his entire attention to catching the words uttered by Bozeman Jack.

With stealthy footsteps the climber approached him, leaping on the man before the latter was aware of his presence. The struggle that followed was of short duration. The sentinel had been pressed backward to the earth, and was held there by his assailant, who had placed one knee on his breast and grasped him by the throat with his left hand. A cord knotted for the occasion was quickly fished from a pocket, and with it and a bit of stick, the fellow was securely gagged. Then his hands were bound and afterward his feet.

The capture had occupied but a few moments of time, and had been so skillfully executed that not a sound of the struggle reached the interior of the cavern.

Leaving the sentinel thus bound, the daring man again approached the canyon, and tossed a pebble across it. This was the signal that had been agreed upon in case of the successful issue of the venture.

While these stirring events were taking place, the leader of the Hummingbird posse had been by no means idle. He had brought up his force; and the bridge was in readiness to be pushed across.

A suppressed but most intense excitement reigned when the pebble dropped near the men.

"Over with it!" the leader commanded, speaking in tones so low that only the men near him could have heard.

There were ropes attached to one end of the light structure, and when it had been hoisted on end it was slowly lowered by means of them across the chasm.

The sailor-cowboy clutched the descending end to keep it from jamming against the rocks and making a noise; and as soon as it was securely in position the posse crossed it.

The loud and angry words of Bozeman Jack, who was still threatening Jake in the hope of obtaining some information from him, reached their ears as they drew near the hidden entrance.

"Now, altogether! Don't let a man of 'em git away!" the leader ordered.

There was a clinking of revolver-locks, like the staccato notes of certain insects; and the posse, with the leader in advance, dashed into the passage.

A groan came from the bound and helpless sentinel as he saw the men hurry by him. It was the only sound he could make, and doubtless came from the depths of his heart. He realized that the days of that particular road-agent band had drawn to a close, and that Bozeman's star had set.

"Charge 'em!" came the loud command as the cavern was gained, and the light of a number of torches lit up the scene within. "Charge 'em, my hearties!"

A tremendous cheer came in reply, and with a chorus of wild yells and a rattle of revolvers, the brave fellows obeyed right willingly.

Never were men more astounded than were the members of the outlaw band. The surprise was complete, and as is usually the case when this occurs, an instant panic reigned.

Bozeman was perhaps the coolest man of the lot. Probably the sudden flaming of his anger aided him in retaining his head. He struck Denver Jake to the earth with a blow of his fist, and then loudly called to his men to rally about him.

But few of them obeyed. The remainder had dropped everything and turned in flight, scrambling almost over each other in their mad desire to reach the tunnel leading to the other exit.

Bozeman fired point blank at the advancing force, but was pressed so hard that whether he did execution or not he could not tell. Then, seeing that resistance was useless and must prove suicidal, he followed the example of his recreant men and ran for the gallery, the few who had tried with him to stem the tide streaming at his heels.

The cheers of the charging party rose higher

and higher as they saw the enemy in flight. They knew the outlaws would be met at the other entrance by the force under Pawnee Bob. Hence, they did not linger in the chamber, but pushed on in pursuit, crowding forward with all haste.

It was a hot and exciting time, and when the tunnel entrance was gained, and the outlaws found themselves opposed there, they threw down what few weapons they had, and surrendered.

All things considered, it was a surprising victory, and a victory gained with comparative ease. Not a man was killed, though several were wounded; some seriously, but not fatally. And thus Bozeman Jack and his road-agents were raked in!

CHAPTER XLV.

DAMAGING EVIDENCE.

WHISKY TIM did not learn a lesson from the failure of his second attack on the Hummer from Hummingbird. It served only to irritate him, and to cause him to talk more loudly and boastfully than ever. So long as anything remained of the ten dollars, he felt rich, and treated himself and his friends liberally, for money could even attract parasites to such a man as he.

"I'll kill 'im yit!" he declared again and again. "I'll have 'is life fer them words he spoke to me. Mebbe I ain't a gen'leman, an' don't wear yaller hair an' wings on my hat, but I ain't a dog, neither!"

In his rage he really seemed to forget that from the first he had been the aggressor.

Of course all this blatant talk did not go unheeded. It was passed from tongue to tongue, and became much magnified in the transmissal. It even reached the ears of the Hummer.

"I shall keep a sharp lookout for him," the latter observed; and that was the only way in which he noticed the reports.

Becoming reckless again by intoxication, Whisky Tim returned to the vicinity of the Cuckoo's Nest, where he hovered for an hour or more, frequently expressing his earnest desire to shoot the Hummer on sight.

He did not enter the saloon, though he was told that Hartsook could be found in there. Possibly he feared to do so.

He had been gone but a short time when the Hummer made his appearance. The latter had no desire to again encounter the crazy villain, and have the disagreeable scene of a few hours before re-enacted. He did not fear Whisky Tim. What he feared was that he might be led, through anger or in self-defense, to seriously injure or kill the man. It nettled him to be so harassed and threatened by a man of that stamp.

He felt, too, that Whisky Tim was not wholly responsible for his deeds. In the first place his brain was sodden by bad whisky; and in the second, the Hummer had good grounds for believing that he was being urged on by Judge Pendergast.

He did not know what direction Whisky Tim had taken on leaving the place, but walked down the street, watching warily every shadow before he advanced into it.

The tumult and excitement of the night had made him feverish and half-ill, and the breath of the cool wind from the mountains was very grateful. So he walked on and on until the end of the street was reached, and then turned about to retrace his way.

He had scarcely gone the distance of a block, when a loud outcry and a scream in front of him, and a few hundred yards away, drew his attention.

From where he was he could not tell what had occurred, but he saw men hurrying in that direction, and quickened his steps.

When he came up to them, he found them gathered about the figure of a man prone on the ground lying on his face in a pool of blood. It was apparent at a glance that the man had been stabbed in the back, and was dead.

Some one turned the body over, that the face might be revealed. A low cry came from the lips of the startled Hummer. The dead man was Whisky Tim!

His low cry was echoed by words of indignation, which quickly swelled into a roar of anger.

Hartsook felt that the event was portentous of ill to him. So far as he knew, he was the last man who had had angry words with Tim. What more natural, then, than that he should be accused of the assassination? for an assassination it undoubtedly was.

He observed that fierce looks were already being bent on him.

"Who done it?" was the universal cry.

The citizens of Cuckoo might be lax in many things, but cold-blooded murder was a thing they would not tolerate, no matter who might be the murderer or who the victim. And to stab a man in the back! That was the foulest crime in their calendar.

Hartsook realized that he was in an exceedingly ticklish position. If the real murderer was not found, he was certain to be accused.

"Has any search been made?" he asked, defiantly meeting the suspicious looks.

"I heerd the noise, an' see a feller runnin'

away, but I wouldn't be willin' to swear who he wuz."

"Was he a large man or a small man?"

He regretted the question as soon as it was asked, for he observed, now, that the speaker was one of Pendergast's heelers.

"Bout your size, I shed say."

The dark looks became darker and fiercer, and the mutterings were ominous.

The crowd was increasing, too, men hurrying that way from all directions. At about that time Red Selkirk came up, panting and half out of breath.

"What's the row?" he queried, pushing his way through the throng.

The circle widened to permit him to look down into the face of the dead.

A number of men had acted on the Hummer's suggestion, and had commenced a search for some trace or clew of the assassin. From one of these a cry arose, and he came hurrying back holding some small object in his hand. It was a knife, the blade blood-covered.

He handed it to Selkirk, who glanced keenly at it, and then held it up for general inspection.

"Does any one rec'nize this hyer?" he asked.

"I 'low it was the tooth-pick with which the job was did!"

In spite of his splendid nerve, Hartsook turned pale as ashes.

He knew the knife, for it was his own!

"Has any one ever seen this hyer sticker afore?" Selkirk again demanded.

"Ay! ay!" came from a dozen fierce throats.

"It's Hike Hartsook's!"

At the same instant, and without any command from Selkirk, the crowd closed around the Hummer from Hummingbird in a dense, angry mass, as if eager to rend him in pieces.

"You ought to know me better than that, boys!" he protested. "Would I have come back here if I was guilty? I declare to you my innocence, on the honor of a man!"

Scant heed was paid to the declaration.

"So it's yourn, is it?" cried Selkirk, elbowing his way toward him. "I mou't 'a' known as much, after what happened to-night."

Hartsook again asserted that he was not guilty.

"Mebbe ye kin prove it; you'll be given a chance, at any rate. Jist now, you're my pris'ner."

He laid his hand heavily on the Hummer's shoulder.

"Hang 'im! String 'im up! No trial fer a feller like that!" were the exclamations that came from all directions.

Red Selkirk doubtless hoped for a lynching bee, but in his capacity of marshal, it was not expedient to show this desire.

"Gen'leman!" and he raised a hand solemnly, "I am an officer of the law, an' I call on you to have some respect fer it. This man hyer is my pris'ner, an' under my pectection. Therefore, I command you to keep your hands off!"

He placed his burly form between the Hummer and the surging crowd, and attempted to advance in the direction of the jail.

"Hang 'im! String 'im up!" came the calls, louder and more furiously than before.

Selkirk raised his hand to wave them back; but their blood was up, and like a pack of maddened wolves they bore down on him and his prisoner. With scant ceremony he was thrust aside, and Hartsook found himself in the clutches of a reckless and irresponsible mob. What that meant, his life on the border told him but too well.

But relief was coming quickly. Lariat Bill had been among those first to look on the face of Whisky Tim, and divining what must inevitably follow, dashed off in search of Old Adamant.

"Collect all the men you can, and at once!" Adamant directed. "It's the work of Judge Pendergast. He's been driven to murder, at last; and has been a murderer in his heart, all the time."

The Man of Rock did not himself remain idle. He had many personal followers, and these he summoned, adding them to the force hastily gathered by the hostler.

All this had consumed time, and the Hummer's danger was becoming very real before they were ready to interfere. Then they moved down the street, with arms in their hands. They charged the mob as they approached it, knocking a number of the men down in the rush, and scattering the others. Then they swarmed around Red Selkirk and his prisoner, forming a compact and almost impregnable body-guard.

The marshal fumed with inward rage, which was the more bitter because he dared not show it.

"We knew you needed help, and so came to your assistance," and Old Adamant smiled sweetly. "Now, if you'll be so kind as to move on up the street, we'll keep these scalawags back until you can lodge your man safe in the jail."

Red Selkirk grudgingly obeyed. He could not refuse. And fifteen minutes later, the Hummer from Hummingbird was once more within the walls of the prison of Cuckoo.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A FARCICAL TRIAL.

AGAIN did the trusty ex-hostler constitute himself the unauthorized sentinel of the jail. He was not alone as before, however. Old

Adamant had not thought it wise to run any unnecessary risk. Pendergast had shown himself so crafty, so powerful, and so fertile in expedients that the Man of Rock was determined to leave him no opportunity for the exercise of his devilish ingenuity. Hence, there were a dozen men, all courageous, honest fellows, under the command of Lariat Bill that night.

It was not a pleasant thing to Hartsook to be thus again thrust into prison and branded as a felon, and to be thought evilly of by his fellow-men, for there could be no doubt that there were in Cuckoo many good men and true who deemed the production of his bloody knife ample evidence of his guilt.

"Seems to me I'm striking hard lines, lately!" he exclaimed, depositing the bewinged hat on a chair and sinking to a seat on the hard cot. "First I was a road-agent, now I am worse—a murderer. I wonder what will happen next?"

He tried to coax a smile to his face, but the effort ended in dismal failure. There was no levity in his heart that night.

There was a feeling of sorrow, too, for the slain man. True, Whisky Tim had twice tried to slay him, but he was positive in the belief that Tim was not following out his own ideas, but those of another, and that other Judge Lemuel Pendergast. And now, Pendergast had slain the drunken wretch with his own hand, or hired some monster in human shape to do the dastardly work for him. And all this for the purpose of criminating and bringing about the death of the Hummingbird Hummer.

The next day Hartsook was brought into a stuffy little court-room, presided over by Pendergast himself, clothed in the authority of police judge. The town was agog with excitement and suspense. Feeling ran high, and any one acquainted with the inflammable material of which the population was composed, must have discerned that but a spark was required to create a conflagration that could only be quenched in blood.

Old Adamant and his friends were on hand at the appointed time to see that justice was done the accused.

The court-room could not contain the tenth of those who desired to listen to the evidence and witness the conduct of the trial.

They crowded the doors and windows, and scrambled and fought for places where they could both see and hear.

A hush fell over all the vast throng, as the Hummer from Hummingbird was conducted into the room. He was pale, but defiant, and a look of conscious innocence rested on his fine face.

Pendergast felt so confident that a conviction could be readily secured that he became liberal and stated that he would have a jury called, instructing Red Selkirk to proceed with the impaneling.

"Gentlemen!" and his voice was as smooth as silk as he looked over the crowded court. "A crime of the gravest character has been committed in our midst. It is not necessary for me to enter into details. The facts are well known to you all. But, as judge, it is incumbent on me to make a statement. Whisky Tim, the only name by which he was known to us, was yesterday murdered in cold blood in the streets of our city.

"Such a crime cannot go uninvestigated. We could never expect our camp to prosper if that should be done. The meanest citizen among us is entitled to protection with the best and most distinguished. Human life is too precious to be sacrificed wantonly. Our code of justice must be upheld and vindicated.

"What the evidence is against the accused will be forthcoming, shortly. The jury, and you, the citizens, will judge it and weigh it impartially. The accused stands well among you; he has many friends; he is influential. The man slain had no friends. He was an outcast and a drunkard, a worthless vagabond, whose life seemed of no use to himself or any one else.

"Yet, notwithstanding this fact, he was a man; and by the ties of common human brotherhood, as well as by our laws, was entitled to life, liberty, and such happiness as he could attain to. His lowly station may have been taken into account by the murderer, whoever he may be, when the fatal blow was given.

"If, upon the evidence, such seems to be the case, you should see to it that it counts for naught. Let justice be done, though the heavens fall!"

There was a show of applause as the judge concluded and sat down; and Red Selkirk bustled about, selecting a jury. Old Adamant watched him closely, and observed that the men he chose were invariably in sympathy with the Pendergast crowd.

The Man of Rock arose, at this point, and offered some objections.

Pendergast frowned.

"I shall try the accused according to the established code of Cuckoo!" he asserted. "I am not even called on to summon a jury, but do it that there may be no questions concerning my fairness and impartiality. Mr. Selkirk, the gentleman thinks you are not giving the prisoner a square deal. Therefore you will select new men."

Naturally those excluded bent bitter looks on the Man of Rock; which he returned, however, with interest.

Again Red Selkirk picked out twelve men; and again Adamant objected. Twice this was repeated.

"The gentleman is endeavoring to obstruct the business of the court," Pendergast declared, arising and speaking with magisterial dignity. "What he hopes to gain thereby I am at a loss to determine. Certainly it does not seem to be justice for his friend. I presume if we should go on and select the whole town he would object to every man.

"Mr. Selkirk, you understand your duty. Swear in the jury!"

Thus were the efforts of Adamant ridden down and made of no effect. Seeing that his presence would be of little avail, he whispered to Lariat Bill and the two retired from the room, much to Pendergast's uneasiness.

The judge had determined to force a verdict of guilty, and bring about the immediate execution of the accused. It would be a most signal triumph for him, under the forms of law—such law as Cuckoo had. And this he hoped to accomplish, while appearing himself as a thoroughly impartial judge.

His face was wreathed with an oily and hypocritical smile as the swearing in of the jury proceeded, after he had asked the usual questions. But for Adamant he would have had no fears of the ultimate result.

A number of witnesses were hastily examined, the privilege being accorded the Hummer of asking such questions as he chose. He asked a few, and then stopped, seeing that they were so well drilled in the story they had agreed to tell that cross-examinations were useless.

All he could offer in his own behalf was the testimony of a number of citizens to his previous good moral character, tending to show the utter improbability of his being the guilty man. To this was added, of course, his own negative evidence.

The fact that the knife found was his was made much of by those testifying. Hartsook did not attempt to deny that the weapon was his, but claimed that it had been stolen from him the day before.

Without leaving their seats the jury brought in a verdict of guilty; and the judge as promptly sentenced the accused man to death. The verdict and the sentence were alike greeted with cheers and hisses, and a warlike time seemed threatening.

Selkirk had prepared for the worst, and collected about him a number of scoundrels whom he could trust to do his bidding. As soon as the judge had ceased speaking, he hurled a noose over the prisoner's neck, and the rope was instantly grasped by his men.

Hartsook maintained his usual calmness of demeanor, though his face whitened perceptibly as he felt the ominous coil. He knew he was in the hands of desperate men, men who, as shown by what was even then occurring, would hesitate at no crime to attain their ends.

The judge turned away and pretended to be busying himself with some papers, as the noose was thrown.

"Take him out!" Selkirk commanded.

Again, as on the night previous, went up wild cries for the blood of the Hummer, the villains growing frantically clamorous as the marshal's guard shoved the prisoner in the direction of the door. And again were weapons drawn by these men, and by the men still cleaving to the cause of the Hummer and believing in his innocence.

And thus, with a rope around his neck, Hartsook was led forth to seeming death.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE MAN OF ROCK TO THE FRONT.

THE court room was quickly emptied of its crowd of spectators. Across the street, in front of a vacant building which had once been used as a store-room, stood a tree with sturdy, low growing branches; and toward this tree Red Selkirk hurried his prisoner.

The loose end of the rope was tossed over one of the boughs, and as quickly grasped by Selkirk's men, while the mob raged and roared like a maddened beast. Apparently only a miracle could now save the life of the Hummer.

Adamant and Lariat Bill, who had, for a number of minutes, been vainly endeavoring to raise a company of men to go to his rescue, now appeared on the scene. Not that the Hummer had fewer friends than formerly. Against a regular mob they would have rallied as one man; but the forms of law had been complied with, and Hartsook duly sentenced according to those forms. It was a victory for Judge Pendergast and his allies, they knew, but still they hesitated.

Adamant and Lariat Bill did not hesitate, however.

With weapons drawn they crowded through the clamorous throng and reached the side of Red Selkirk. Here the Man of Rock, who held a knife in one hand, struck savagely at the rope—so savagely that it parted, and the men who were beginning to surge on it were thrown heavily to the ground.

Lariat Bill at the same moment threw open

the door of the vacant building; and before Red Selkirk and his supporters understood what was intended, Adamant and the hostler had drawn the Hummer into the building and closed the door.

Such a scream of rage as went up at this! To be thus cheated of a hanging spectacle was more than the mob could endure. Red Selkirk was fairly bewildered at the very daring of the act. He had anticipated nothing of the kind; had not even thought, when he saw the hostler and the Man of Rock, that any serious interference was meant.

He threw himself against the door, and finding that it had been hastily locked and bolted, drew back and emptied the contents of his revolver through its panels. The members of the mob, many of them, imitated his example, and for a few moments the splinters flew in showers. It was a mere waste of ammunition. The men were not such fools as to remain near the door, well knowing that something of the kind would be done.

Seeing that he could accomplish nothing in that way, and that he was only throwing away valuable time, the enraged marshal ordered an attack on the building.

"Beat in the door!" he cried. "Tear the house down over their heads!"

The rage of the mob now passed all bounds. They scattered in search of weapons with which to beat in the doors and walls, returning quickly with a motley array of improvised battering-rams.

From within the building came the strong voice of Adamant:

"We will fire on the first man that tries to get in here! We are well-armed and will not be taken alive. And, if we are killed there are many who will die before we do. Take warning!"

He might as well have shouted the words to the stones in the street for all the heed that was paid to them.

Again the angry cries and shouts went up in deafening volume; and the battering tools commenced to rain blows on the stout door. It was stoutly built, however, and the bolts on the inner side were of the strongest, so that for a time the blows made little impression.

This was too slow work for many; and these procured torches, and going to the rear of the building, fired it in several places. This act, and the cries it brought from the mob witnessing it caused a temporary suspension of the attack on the door.

"They mean to smoke us out!" said the Man of Rock, the anxious look in his face deepening. "Either that, or roast us alive in here!" and the Hummer fingered his weapons nervously. "I'm much afraid our time is up!"

The flames had caught, but at only one point did the fire make any headway. That was near the roof, in a nest-like projection under the eaves.

"We must try to stop that!" Adamant declared. "If we don't, the whole house will soon be on fire."

"The Hummer mounted to the garret, which placed him near, and almost directly in front of the fire. What he could do yet remained to be seen. He had no water, and to extinguish the flames with only his bare hands seemed hopeless.

He got hold of a bit of board, however, and when the fire ate through the wall he tried to pry off the planking which had caught and push it away from the house. This exposed him partially to the gaze of those below, and a volley of shots was the result. But the smoke was curling about him in such dense and blinding volumes the members of the bloodthirsty mob could not see to aim their pistols with any degree of effectiveness.

At the same time, Adamant and Lariat Bill, who had obtained material wherewith to erect a sort of barricade, began to fire through the walls of the building at the mob. Some of their shots took effect, as they could tell by the oaths and shrieks.

As a matter of course their fire was returned. There had been firing of this kind going on for some time, but blindly, for the mob could not tell where the men within were stationed. They could tell where to aim their weapons, now, by the direction from which the shots of the defenders came; but the barricade interposed as a shelter for the latter.

"They're bound to do us up!" said Adamant. "We can't long hold out against half the town. Oh, if this had happened but an hour later!"

By desperate work and much perilous exposure of his person, the Hummer managed to rip off and hurl to the earth many of the burning boards, and thus in a measure check the headway of the fire.

As the mob observed this, and the fires below had now all gone out, a rush was again made for the front door, and once more the blows rained on it furiously and ominously.

Soon a breach was made; seeing which, and realizing that to remain below longer meant capture and death, Adamant and Lariat Bill retreated up the stairway to the garret where Hartsook had installed himself.

The blows still rained and the breach widen-

ed, and the ponderous door soon gave way. Then, the mob, reckless of their lives in the mad excitement that controlled them, poured into the building.

They saw the deserted barricade and the stairway, and knew the men whose death they sought had taken refuge above.

"We shall defend ourselves!" the Man of Rock called warningly, in a voice that was cool and determined notwithstanding the uproar and danger that surrounded him. "We shall defend ourselves while a cartridge lasts and we have strength to use our weapons."

Nevertheless, a dash was made by some of the more heedless for the stairway.

Instantly the revolvers of the defenders spouted flame. Two of the attacking party fell back into the arms of their friends, badly hit, a thing which seemed to somewhat cool the ardor of the others.

"Come on, if you want some more of the same medicine. We'll die fighting, if we must die!" Adamant shouted.

The quiet courage of the speaker, with the known bravery of his companions, was not calculated to encourage reckless rushes, such as this had been. But when the injured men had been borne to the rear, and were no more visible, the old passion flamed afresh in the breasts of the assailants.

"Down with 'em!" came the cries. "Drag 'em out of there!"

Red Selkirk, who was really a brave man, quite different in this respect from Judge Pendergast, placed himself at the head of a second party, and another dash was made at the stairway.

It resulted as before. Some of the members of the mob were hit so severely that they had to be carried away by their friends, and Red Selkirk received a ball through his right shoulder which completely disabled him.

Another rush was made, resulting as before; but it was the last. Loud cries arose from the street, mingled with the "pop, pop" of pistols. A general stampede was taking place. Those within the room observing this, and hearing a series of ringing cheers, left the foot of the stairway and hastened into the street.

What they saw was not calculated to inspire them with new courage. A score or more of mounted men were charging up the street, straight for the building, and driving the demoralized mob before them like chaff.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

CONCLUSION.

"HURRAH!" and the Hummer tossed into the air the hat with the cuckoo wings, catching it gracefully as it came down.

"It's our men!" exclaimed Adamant, hurrying to the door, from which the mob had fled.

It was these men, now charging up the street, of whom the Man of Rock had thought when despairingly wishing the fight had come an hour later. They were mounted detective officers, summoned by the Man of Rock, and had ridden from Hummingbird that morning.

As Adamant stepped into the doorway he saw on the opposite side of the street, standing in front of the court room, Judge Lemuel Pendergast. There was on the judge's face a look of distress and alarm. His gaze fell on Adamant even as the latter looked at him.

With the quickness of thought the Man of Rock cast aside his hat, bringing with it the mass of hair that had for so long been one of his distinguishing peculiarities. At the same time he stripped the beard from his face, bringing the firm, resolute jaws into greater prominence than ever; and slipped from his nose a thin, waxen covering. And Pendergast, staring as if his eyes would start from their sockets, saw before him, not Old Adamant, but Ralph Raymond, the detective!

With a cry of terror he turned in flight, glancing back over his shoulders as he ran, as if to assure himself that he had seen correctly, for never was metamorphose more complete.

The revelation of the true character of Old Adamant was not without its effect on the already stampeding mob. Those who had been most intimately associated with Pendergast and partners in his guilt were as much frightened as had been the judge himself. To the gambling trio the knowledge came with the crushing force of a thunderbolt; and they likewise turned in flight, as did also Arkansaw Tom.

Riding furiously up to the door of the building, the horsemen drew rein. Three of them leaped to the ground, offering their animals to Raymond, Hartsook and Lariat.

"Something of a row, eh?" and the leader of the police force looked questioningly at the man at whose request he had come and whom he was now ready to obey.

"The worst I ever got into, I think," returned Raymond. "You were just in the nick of time. But, we haven't leisure for any explanations, now!"

He leaped upon one of the horses, and in this was imitated by the Hummer and Lariat.

"The scamps will get away yet, if we're not mighty quick in our movements! You!" indicating the three dismounted men, "go to the upper end of this street, and don't let a man

leave town in that direction. We must corral them in the camp here."

He then directed other men to guard other streets and alleys, and with what remained of the force rode after the flying men.

Arkansaw Tom had gone straight to the Cuckoo's Nest to secure the cash he had there. He had just come out of the building and joined Pendergast and the gamblers, who were making hasty preparations for continuing their flight.

"There they are!" cried Raymond, pointing to the five. "They are the bell-wethers of this flock of black sheep. They mustn't get away."

As the fleeing men were on foot, the horsemen quickly overtook them, almost riding them down. A hot fight followed, but Pendergast and his men were soon overpowered and made prisoners.

Within an hour thereafter, all their chief men were captives, and in the hands of the guardians of the law—not the bastard law of Cuckoo, but the real law of the country.

A few words concerning Ralph Raymond, the detective.

As has been stated, he had been spirited away at the instigation of Judge Lemuel Pendergast and held at the cabin in the hills by the villains, Blinky Jim and Jed Jenkins.

The report of his death which they made to Pendergast was, however, false in every particular. The facts were that he had escaped from the cabin during one of their absences, and that they feared to make a true report to their chief.

Hence, they had concocted the lie about how he had tried to escape and been slain, and as a proof of their assertions prepared the alleged grave back of the cabin, sure the judge would not have the grave opened to ascertain the truth.

They had thought Raymond would leave the country, and thus they would obtain their reward, and be in no danger of discovery. But chancing to be at Hummingbird, they saw Adamant book himself at the stage office for the journey to Cuckoo, and certain words he let fall made them think the passenger a friend and ally of Raymond, the detective. This awoke new fears in their breasts. Once before they had seen Raymond in this disguise, but of course had not recognized him, nor thought him the same man they had lately had a prisoner.

They determined to waylay the stage and slay the passengers; which attempt was detailed in an early chapter.

As Old Adamant, the Man of Rock, Ralph Raymond had boldly returned to Cuckoo and entered on the work assigned him by his superiors in the Secret Service.

The manner in which he communicated with Edith will be remembered. In the note received by the hand of Hartsook, she recognized the handwriting of Raymond, and hence became obedient to the commands of the Hummer, who was also a detective, allied with Raymond in hunting down the criminals in the town of Cuckoo.

Raymond communicated with her constantly by letter, and on a number of occasions managed to meet her. As Jacob Schwartz, the Dutch hostler, his opportunities in that line were ample.

The punishment of Pendergast and his associates came in due course of time. The murder of Whisky Tim was traced home to them, as was also a large number of other crimes scarcely less black in hue. As a consequence, the ring-leaders were given life sentences at hard labor.

The result was a great purification of Cuckoo's moral atmosphere. The criminal element was driven from the place, and when the day of the much-talked-of election rolled around, the entire vote of the camp was given to Ralph Raymond, who had originally announced himself under the name of Adamant Rock.

His marriage with Edith Pendergast followed shortly. In fact, there was a double wedding, for Lariat Bill, now an office-holder, and addressed as Mr. William Jackson, was at the same time united for life to pretty Betty Blessington!

As Edith Pendergast—for that was her name, the judge having assumed the name of her father, Lemuel Pendergast—had owned the fee simple of the Gold Bug Mine, when she became Mrs. Ralph Raymond, she concluded that nothing could be more delightful than to make her future home with her husband in Cuckoo. And this was a thing altogether so agreeable to Ralph Raymond that it was done.

He is now the general manager of the mine, which yields a princely income every year, and William Jackson is its superintendent.

Mollie Stubbs remains unmarried to this day, though she has had designs on many men since the time when she tempted Hartsook with the cookies!

And Hartsook, the cheery, irrepressible Hummer from Hummingbird, still pursues his chosen calling, and is gaining fame and fortune thereby, being a terror to evil-doers and a friend to every good man and true.

THE END.

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